

What Early Readers Are Saying

"It should be required reading. Mission accomplished." – Linda S.

"Filled with stories of loss and community, grief and joy, this book is a balm for our modern culture of individualism and disconnection. The circle it cultivates is indeed a welcoming one, where each of us might find some healing together." – Stephen S.

"I can't imagine the courage it must have taken to be this open about one's life." – Aaron V.

"Talking about mental illness offers a beginning to unlock the door. Interwoven with story, insight and wisdom, this book truly resonates." – Jeff M.

"Every human can relate to the experiences of loss, mental illness, survival and joy described in this book. The writing is a great reminder of the healing power we all have in sharing our stories."
– Devan H.

"A raw and intimate look at life and the journey to find purpose and meaning through adversity and recovery. By the time I finished reading, I found myself a little less alone in my own experiences and a little more understanding of the world around me." – Mike R.

I dedicate this book to the great trickster of life.

And my own little trickster.

Coyotes abound.

Welcome Back!

Hi, my name is Jake Orlowitz and I wrote this book, *Welcome Back to the Circle*. I wrote it to further tell my story, and I wrote it, again, for you.

We don't talk enough about failure. We also don't talk enough about what happens after recovery. When illness has faded into the past, when symptoms recede or are well-managed, when trauma releases its grip... what then?

The simple answer is, you build a life. Of course it's richer and more complicated than that. Therein lies the rub, and the joy.

This book is about the aftermath of going off course: when you have found your way again, but it's a new way, something unexpected and altogether better and different.

This book starts off with fire, and ends with fire-forged community – apt bookends for tales of how crisis builds as it destroys.

I hope you'll enjoy any, or every, piece in between. I hope that they inspire you to tell more of your own stories, and to build the life you want.

Welcome back to the circle. Thank you for being here.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Mountains are Burning	6
COVINO	20
Honey It's Hard	23
Jesus, MLK, & Hitler Walk Into a Bar	26
Humanager	30
17 Myths about Being a Good Ally	31
Lives Less Linear (Part 1)	37
The Ally's Creed	46
How to Decide How to Quit	47
The River	50
From Swats to Licks	52
Letter from an Anxiety Coach	53
Minute Changes	56
Try That At A Country Lynch Mob	57
The Last Goodbye to my Grandmother	58
Good At It	59
Mapbook	60
Litany	62
Unvirtuous Circle	63
Turkey	64
Bleeding Heart	65
Lives Less Linear (Part 2)	66
I Told Her a Thought in Georgia	76
Three Wise Words	77
Can You Repeat That?	78
Bad Advice for a Good Marriage	82
Why the silence?	85
How to Get off the Medications That Saved Your Life	88

Lives Less Linear (Part 3)	91
For Those Seeking Support	100
Parting Thoughts	102
Acknowledgements	103
About the Author	104

"If things go wrong, don't go with them."

– Roger Babson

"I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept"

– Angela Davis

"If you ever drop your keys into a river of molten lava, let 'em go, because man, they're gone."

– Jack Handy

"When you hit a wrong note, it's the next note that makes it good or bad."

– Miles Davis

The Mountains are Burning

My Fire Diary

Saturday night the lighting came, thousands of bright white flashes in the sky. People said it was the most beautiful storm they'd ever seen. Hundreds of fires sparked across the landscape. The fires connected, forming what they call a *complex*.

They cut the power to our neighborhood in 95 degree heat. We sat around a pool telling ghost stories and drinking ice water from our cooler in large orange mugs we'd gotten from the hospital when they were worried my wife would hemorrhage before the baby was born.

Tuesday we came back from cool evening beach air to an impenetrable gray fog. We walked into our house, shut every door and window. There was a dark cloud and we were at its center. My brain started shouting, "When you're surrounded by air you can't breathe, shouldn't you leave?" I fell asleep in a hot, powerless, sealed-up room enveloped by plumes from nearby fires. My wife woke me up at 1am. We'd gotten the call. It was time to go.

I'm SAFE in the CZU Lightning Complex forest fires. We evacuated Wednesday morning at 2am from the Santa Cruz Mountains (from our neighborhood in Bonny Doon). We went down to stay with my wife's stepdad.

My cats are safe. Baby is happy. Had time to pack the essentials. Monitoring wind speeds and evacuation orders but will probably be dislocated for several days. The only upside I can see in this is that now COVID masks can serve double duty as smoke filters. That's the best thing I can say.

We lived at Swift Circle in March. In April we moved to Empire Lane. Wednesday we evacuated to Fredericks Boulevard. Thursday we are going to Pearl Street. So, yeah.

It was inevitable that smoke damage to Empire was severe, even if the house wasn't engulfed. The hottest forest fire in 100 years passed right through our property. Structures may have been spared, but the entire region has been drowning in smoke for days.

The Santa Cruz Mountains got fucked. Even if we could move back, it would be a disaster zone for months and a wasteland for years.

I'm not angry, I'm just being realistic. We may still be able to get some stuff out of the house. Maybe.

Meanwhile, we are going to be "vacationing" at a beach cabin, so I really can't complain. People lost everything. I have everything I need (except t-shirts).

I don't know what would be worse: that my neighborhood burned down BUT my house didn't AND I am moving back into a wasteland OR that my neighborhood burned down AND my house burned down AND I need to replace everything including a place to live.

Fucking conjunctions.

I think the not knowing is as bad as the burning.

I'm thinking about what I didn't take with me: paddleboards, our microsuede couch, our latex foam mattress, a thousand books, a really good space heater, our bright red KitchenAid mixer, my collection of reusable straws, my tapestries from Nepal, a collection of notes from the mental hospital... the list is endless.

And yet: I've practiced dozens of times packing up in an hour and jetting off to another country. It becomes routine to grab just what you need. I did that. I got my computer, my medications, and lots of underwear.

There are things I get to take with me no matter where I am. You can't burn down my SWADDLING skills. I am an excellent swaddler. You can't remove from me detailed knowledge of Wikipedia's neutrality and verifiability policies. My photos and writings are almost entirely in the cloud.

What I would miss is the view from our backyard. The trees that I don't know are still standing. The crystal that hangs in our window. My wife's mother's paintings.

It's weird to not know if you'll touch these things again. It's weird not knowing.

I'm playing with the reality that this week I'm a climate refugee. I had to flee the Santa Cruz Mountains.

But I can go to downtown Santa Cruz and stay with my stepfather, to my other friend's house downtown, to my wife's family beach cabin in the next town over, up to Berkeley to stay with friends, up farther to Humboldt where my wife's mom is, way down south to Los Angeles where my wife's sister is, to a hotel in San Jose, or even a flight to the East Coast back to my own family.

This is privilege.

There are people right now in parking lots and dusty fairgrounds and packed civic auditoriums. They are the losers of climate change. They are much more likely to be poor. They are much more likely to not be white.

Climate catastrophe is racist and classist. Not addressing global climate change is racist and classist.

This week I'm a climate refugee, but I'm one of the "winners". My life just relocated temporarily. It's an inconvenience. Imagine what happens when you don't just move everything, you LOSE everything. This is already happening to millions. One day it will happen to you, if we don't take drastic global action.

Thursday afternoon we heard our house is still standing. Our landlord drove down from Washington with a suppression tank and a band of intrepid neighbors put out spot fires.

The structures are all somehow intact on our property. Almost everything around it is scorched. Amazingly, the same is true for my stepdaughter's dad's house: unburnt while surrounded by destruction. She may be the luckiest kid in Santa Cruz to have two houses, both in the mountains, untouched by the blaze.

This is not yet over. The refreshing moist air blowing in from the coast Sunday night will collide with a tropical storm from the south; it will cause a new uptick in winds and possibly even more lighting, the kind that started 400 fires last week.

There's a non-zero chance our house will catch fire in the second round, either from reigniting remnants or flying embers. There's a non-zero chance the entire city will have to evacuate. The latter is unlikely, but it's not impossible.

Everything in Santa Cruz, even miles from the mountains, is coated with a thin layer of ash.

We have agonized over too many good options. Stay alone, stay with family, stay up North, stay in Santa Cruz, bring the cats, leave the cats with family, wait it out, evacuate early...

But no matter what it will be weeks before the literal smoke clears.

Our baby's lungs need fresher air, so we're going to Humboldt in Northern California. My mother-in-law lives there. She's going to let us stay in her main house and she'll move into her studio. She's an artist. She's a master chef. It will be more than alright.

I ache for the people who have definitively lost everything, who have nowhere to go.

The afternoon sky was thick on Saturday as I ran errands. Talking on the phone with my sister, my throat began to hurt and run dry. The air is intermittently extremely unhealthy, generally hazy, or occasionally nice. Getting outside is a needed change, but it can also be a reminder of how bad things are.

It's unbelievable how bad things are, and how good we have it.

When I got home Saturday I took a nap, the kind I haven't had in nearly a decade. It was like a dissolution of mind. A departure from this city. Like my brain was producing something to lessen the reality of reality.

We had dinner like well mannered people. Roast chicken. Corn. Wine. Facebook was filled with flames.

I took a bath with my son. He's going through the classic four-month sleep regression, but it's hard not to think his system is out of whack. That he senses something is off.

We all sense something is off. It is off. It is way off.

Sunday, after a 6-hour drive, during which the baby slept soundly for 5.5 hours and the last 30 minutes we had to blast his favorite techno song on repeat, we arrived in Humboldt.

Dinner was basil and walnut pesto pasta with heirloom tomato salad and sparkling white wine. Dessert was a plum sorbet and homemade plum ice cream. Is this a disaster?

Yes. I cannot go home. Until I can go home, or can call someplace else home, this is still a disaster.

I am trying to resist depression and embrace sadness. Depression is a whimper into a void. Sadness is a howl, a primal groan. Depression is dry. Sadness is soaked, like Humboldt at night, dense with coastal fog.

I woke up Monday morning and asked, "Now what do we do?"

"We hang out. We take a nap. We go for a walk." my wife said.

We still have things to do. You do not stop drinking coffee. You do start doing yoga.

I don't want to floss. Flossing is what normal people do in normal times. Flossing is what you do when you know you'll still have teeth and you want to keep them.

I don't know what I'll have or what I'll be able to keep.

The baby is starting to try at sitting up. He doesn't want to lie down. He wants his head bobbling, alert, looking around. He is playing with the edges of balance.

My wife's aunt was over for dinner Sunday night. She reassured me I was safe, grounded, free, and balanced. I can agree with her on safe and free. Grounded and balanced are going to take a while.

I don't believe in energy healing, but she laid her hands on me and told me there were roots coming out of my body, attached to a great crystal in the center of the earth. I don't believe in energy healing, but after she took her hands off my spine still tingled.

I will accept all the help I can get.

Monday lunch was two types of chicken sausage with summer corn and green bean salad. Dessert was watermelon. Thirteen of my landlord's friends have lost their houses.

Over Monday's dinner of line-caught albacore, red slaw, yellow curry broccolini, and garden salsa, a family member quipped, "Well, has anything *else* happened to you lately?"

He was being sarcastic. It was all in good fun.

"Actually our cat almost died this week."

That's what I said. It's true.

Tuesday morning at 5am we rushed our cat to the vet. She was running out of blood. As the doctor described the treatment plan, she said to me, "We really need to know if you're going to go through with it, because she's starting to get shocky".

Of course we went through with it.

That Tuesday night we evacuated. I didn't have to move two cats in a forest fire because one was already in an air-conditioned hospital.

When I brought Aziza to our stepfather's evac shelter on Wednesday, she was energetic and happy to be unhooked from her catheter.

She was alive. She was back with us. We were all safe, together.

So yes Uncle Donald, something else happened this week.

You just wouldn't believe it if I told you.

Our cat almost died this week, after the lightning but before the evacuation order, because she was running out of blood. Literally. Her body was attacking its own red blood cells and she had severely low levels.

Our cat has an autoimmune disorder. It's idiopathic, which means it arose spontaneously and without a known cause.

We had to evacuate Wednesday because the lightning struck Sunday because humans have been burning fossil fuels for hundreds of years.

Sudden and ravaging as they seemed, the California fires are not idiopathic. We can't predict them, but we know the cause. It's us.

Native Americans used to burn the forest every few years. They kept the growth low and the heat regular. They knew not to let the land go, or nature would reclaim it for herself. Native Americans see no distinction

between the land and themselves. They are of it. They are interdependent.

We've built housing complexes on land that hasn't burned for over 50 years. Nature abhors a vacuum, but it's also uneasy with excessive growth, so it corrects.

My cat's immune system senses something is wrong, so it destroys her own blood. It's also correcting.

Nature doesn't care who is causing the climate to change or stopping the forests from clearing. Nature just corrects.

We are part of nature, and now, naturally, nature is correcting us.

Human existence can be absurd. It is all the more insulting because of its randomness, the haphazardness of tragedy.

It's unreal. My house is in a circle surrounded by destruction. It's more than partly due to the bandit firefighters who put out spot burns 'against official orders'. More unreal is that my stepdaughter's dad lives up the road and that same sacred circle is over there: a house intact, scorched all around, because of the rebel community who wouldn't let it burn. And because of wind direction and sheer luck.

Postmodernity has some interesting riddles:

"How do you shelter in place when you have to evacuate?"

"How do you avoid visiting people inside because of COVID when you can't go outside because of smoke?"

"How long can humans go without human contact?"

"Where should someone live when they've destroyed their home's home?"

My mother-in-law is a Buddhist. She has books on her shelf like the *Sutras of Patanjali* and *Making Friends with Death*. She is of the mind that the very meaning of existence is impermanence – that only when we let go can we go in peace. There’s another school of thought that says we are already gone. The environment is dead: we killed her. But we can still save something for the next generation of humans to come along, leaving gracefully, rather than in a cloud of smoke.

On Friday night our cat died. She wasn’t eating and would have needed a feeding tube in her neck for weeks. We had left her with family in Santa Cruz when we went north, so my wife's stepdad was there when they put her down. From afar there was agony in the waiting: she wasn’t gone yet, then they were doing it now, then she was dying. Losing the cat was harder than when we thought we had lost the house and all of our stuff.

I wanted Aziza to see my baby crawl.

When firefighters prioritize what to save, they start with life, then property, then nature itself. It’s right there in the manuals – official procedure. When did it happen? When did we decide that property was more important than nature? How did we choose to care so little about that which gave us so much?

When we get home we’ll pick a spot in my wife's stepdad’s backyard. We’ll put Aziza there in soft dirt, with flowers and memories. We’ll visit her when we have dinner. We’ll leave her body bits of salmon.

But where will we bury the Earth?

In truth, the planet will be fine. The Earth will bury *us*. Who will come to visit our graves? Who will leave us flowers?

Most of Santa Cruz has been let back into their homes, but "In Bonny Doon a lot of hard work was still left to do with fire damaged trees, ash pits, and other hazards present...characterized as still very dangerous," said the state fire agency.

An ash pit, by the way, is a pile of hot coals where a tree once stood. Basically, the ground is on fire.

Even among the residents of Bonny Doon, ours is the last zone still evacuated.

At my mother-in-law's house in Arcata we began to feel a bit staid. Not quite free, not quite settled. So Tuesday we went to the hills. My family owns land by a river called the Mad. The Mad River.

For three days we spent time in the shade under the hot afternoon sun and then went up top to camp at dinner with an outdoor kitchen, satellite wifi, outhouses with stone floors, and a wood-fired hot tub. It was an escape from an escape.

By Thursday the smoke had found us. The valley was thick with what looked like a low fog, but it was not fog. Even seven hours north of Santa Cruz, there were new fires, other fires, fires all across the state. That's the thing about climate change: you can't run from it.

The whole concept of 'Spaceship Earth' was that we're all on a single vessel hurtling through nothingness, so we had better keep the ship healthy. The ship is burning. Sure, the fire is on the left wing, and most people are in the bulkhead. What of it? The air is shunted through the

same pipes. It's only a matter of time before we're all choking down embers.

We finally arrived back in Santa Cruz to collapse at my wife's stepdad's house. We walked in and it was empty. Door unlocked. No stepdad.

Sunlight crept through the blinds into an empty room where our cat was gone.

I sobbed in a leather recliner.

That night we went to the beach cabin. Built over 100 years ago, it is charming, but "funky". Unloading the car with all of our known belongings for the fourth time in two weeks, I overheard two ladies sauntering by. "That is the most expensive real estate in Capitola", one said as she passed our street. Haggard, I trudged a bag of dirty laundry and the baby bed into the house.

It's true that this house is a great luxury. But some things are worth more than the asking cost. Having the wifi password already in your computer. Knowing which drawer the forks are in. Being able to count the steps in the dark.

The CZU fires destroyed 900 houses and 90,000 acres. That's nearly a thousand peoples' homes and 25% of the county's land.

We are still lucky. Our landlord and our nearby friend have both seen our property and it is free of even vague signs of fire. It's important never to say in a tragedy that you are *blessed*. That implies the person who lost their family home is cursed. It is bad form. It is a lie as well. God doesn't care who burns and who doesn't. God isn't interested in smoke and wind.

My baby is lying on the carpet. He is practicing kicking his legs and learning where his arms are. He is cooing. He is spitting up wisdom. Telling me it will be okay. And for him, I will still believe. For him, I will try to make it true.

They finally opened up the road the rest of the way to our house. We drove to see it through what looked like charred desert. Like a Colorado winter. Leaves burned off bare. Ground dusted with white ash like an apocalyptic snow.

It was 3pm and the midday bright blue sky was hidden under a veil of grayish orange – high-altitude smoke from fires burning all across the state. It looked like hell.

The news called the color of the sky in the Bay area amber, but that's wrong. Amber is liquid, translucent, revealing. This sky was opaque and eerie and impenetrable. We sparked the fires. We blocked out the sun.

Our house was just as we left it in that mad escape three weeks ago, grabbing random items, chucking things on couches and beds. The landlord had taken our food out of the fridge to save the appliance. Our freezer was lined with frozen mold from when the power came back on.

It will take weeks to move back in, but we have somewhere to go back to and all of our stuff is there, just mildly tinged with the scent of blackened earth.

—

A news article told of a man who woke up to fire encroaching on his house. The reverse 911 call to evacuate him never rang. He walked

outside and looked to his pond, which he had built to provide water to save his house, and instead he got in the pond to save himself. He brought a metal pipe to breathe while submerged, like a makeshift snorkel. He put a metal rowboat upside down over his head to shield himself from the flames. He survived.

The road he lived on was called Last Chance.

This is us in climate change. We are under a boat, breathing through a tube, taking refuge in the waters we thought would save our possessions. We are inches away from incineration. We are barely taking in oxygen. But we may make it out alive. This is Last Chance. We are here.

COVINO

Come on in, due salutations,
'Tis the season for libations!

Put down all your earthly asks,
Please remove your stuffy masks.

How's your mother, how's your father?
Have you visited? Oh, why bother.

What else can we talk about?
Did you hear that moron shout?

Never mind, that is depressing,
How our nation is regressing.

I meant to move to climes upbeat.
Anyways, just have a seat.

Have some wine and have some cheese,
Have some comfort, have some ease.

How's James at college, kicking ass?
Or can he never go to class?

Is Susy looking for a job?
Just walk in and turn the knob.

Show a CV, flash a smile,
Warning this might take a while.

It's hard to go from door to door,
When you're lying on the floor.

Shelter's such a mournful bore,
Netflix such a mounting chore.

Life's a rut and nothing more;
Eyes are tired, butt is sore.

How I've gotten so off topic,
Did you see Michelle's biopic?

What a lady, what a gem.
How lucky were we to have them.

And now we have to have each other,
Even Eileen's snoring brother.

Down there in the musty basement.
Better than on crumbling pavement.

Yikes, I've one more time descended,
Past is past, and wounds are mended.

Now turn your eyes to those around you.
How your bounty does abound you.

Perk up your ears, I've got to say,
Time to claim a germ-free day.

Cherished friends all through the years
Gather round, let's all say cheers.

Cheers!
To all those in the room.

Including here,
And those on Zoom.

Honey It's Hard

"Honey, I need you to feel something," I said on a bed in California.
"It's hard."

Normally these words would be followed by tantalizing *oohs* or sumptuous *ahhs*. It was hard. But not in a good way.

We're talking about my ball. Righty. The smaller one. Testicle 2.

It was firm. Not like falafel firm. Like golf ball firm.

As soon as I got back to the east coast, I saw my doctor. He referred me to a radiologist. He ordered an ultrasound but the tech wouldn't break his poker face despite my probing. They sent me straight to a urologist.

I walked in. He said, "You'll want to sit down." Before I was settled, he finished, "We're going to have to take it out."

There are moments of shock one remembers in one's life. Of stupefaction. But they are often superseded by more practical matters.

My urologist promptly asked if I wanted a prosthetic. "A prosthetic testicle?" I asked. *Hmmm...*

He brought out a small case of differently-sized fake nuts. They ranged from cashew to shell-on walnut. He could put one in through the same incision as the removal. I had until the following week to decide. That's when they'd take out righty.

My first thought walking out of the urologist's office was... Don't tell mom. She's gonna freak.

At home I did some focus groups.

My girlfriend explained that were it not for the whole baby thing women would be all penis.

My college friend's wife remarked that it'd be easier to fit the whole sac in your mouth with only one ball.

I knew then I would be a uniballer for the rest of my life.

One odd thing about my cancer was that it raised my hormone levels so high I could pass a pregnancy test. I was growing something that wanted to grow. It had to go.

The night before surgery I had a goodbye party. I took off my shorts, took some last photos for memories, and just ogled the easy symmetry of the pair. They got along. Lefty hung lower, and righty nestled in above. They never fought. They looked good together.

The next morning I woke up at 6. I wrote on my right thigh in black marker... THIS ONE. And on my left thigh... NOT THIS ONE. I was at the hospital by 8, they put me under anesthesia at 9, and I woke up by 11. By 12 I was home.

Until then it had been all too easy. But then I had to lie down. Have you ever tried to move your whole body without flexing a single abdominal muscle? It took 10 minutes to get from my feet to my back. Every inch was agony.

The first night was hard.

The next day I woke up, took my Vicodin, and watched 63 *Key & Peele* videos on my living room rug. I laughed uncontrollably which didn't even hurt, because Vicodin.

They call the operation I had a "radical orchiectomy." I think that's right. It's very extreme. One day, 2. The next day, 1. That's a 50% loss of ball overnight.

Still, I had to visit my oncologist. The mustachioed man laid out my options. I had a 25 % chance of recurrence with my stage 1 embryonal cancer. I could knock that out with a single round of chemo.

I went home and bought a subscription to a medical review site. I printed out 18 articles, 350 pages. I read them all. There were three protocols, each appropriate: Chemo, Lymph Node Surgery, or... Active Surveillance.

The first was toxic drugs. The second could leave you unable to ejaculate. The third was... *intense watching*.

I chose the third. For five years I would do regular blood tests and scans. A fair price for a 75% chance of avoiding chemo.

I managed the next six months like a savvy program director. I had a spreadsheet unceremoniously named Ball. I went to every blood test, X-ray, and CT scan. My hormone numbers never went back up.

I now live the life of a streamlined man, and though there were early days of phantom ball syndrome, where I reached for something that was not there, I've gotten used to the new me.

What does this have to do with mental health? Mental illness takes pieces of you. And you sometimes never get them back. They have to be cut out in order to move on. In order to live. And after they're gone, you've gotta have a spreadsheet-and-clipboard level of vigilance to make sure they don't return. It's more streamlined that way, and nobody has to die.

Jesus, MLK, & Hitler Walk Into a Bar

Who gets served first?

Mental health is not only a personal or family problem. We live in a complex world full of trouble and social ills. This piece is less about the trapped person in a burning house than the fact that the whole building is on fire. We seek to heal ourselves, but even while pursuing that quest we remain a part of the larger whole.

There's been increasing talk of compassionate engagement with both sides of the white supremacy struggle. It is a call for a more Buddhist, nonviolent, noble, and in many ways unbiased approach, seeking to understand what's behind all the anger on the other side. Jesus turning the other cheek, or at least lending an ear. Buddha recognizing suffering in the rageful.

I want to offer a Wikipedia-inspired context for that framework, which I'll call the neutrality vs. due-weight distinction. What do I mean?

Well, for the spiritually ambitious it is compelling to find those with the most seething anger and hear them out, to see pain and ignorance and insecurity underlying violence and aggression, to probe both sides. This is gospel *neutrality*, the "toughest test": can you keep your mind and heart open when faced with vitriol you disagree with? Can you love the sinner?

Let me offer the other end of the spectrum – based in pragmatism, giving *due weight*.

We are humans, not demigods or apostles. We have limited time and energy. Listening, empathy, and compassion take enormous amounts of emotional labor. If we had an infinite amount of it, we would give everyone the ears, hearts, and help they need. We don't have infinite

emotional energy though, so we have to make some choices. Where do we spend our time? Who do we defend, support, and seek to understand first?

The due-weight approach suggests that we first invest the most emotional labor into the experiences of those being oppressed, and only then any remaining marginal amount of that energy into those doing the oppressing. It's not that there's anything wrong with understanding the twisted thoughts and feelings of a Nazi. It's just that we should prioritize reaching out to, making space for, and reassuring those who are targets of dominance and hatred.

Here's an analogy. In the neutrality world, there is a loud *debate* on the street and both sides need to get time to speak, rebut each other — time to question their views and broaden their perspectives. It makes sense to hear out the anger because there is indeed depth beneath it.

In the due-weight world, there is a *beating* happening on the street, and the powerful are harming their target. In that situation, do you first seek to understand what trauma motivated the attacker, or do you insert yourself between the two, bring the victim to a refuge, listen to their life story of vulnerability and powerlessness, and advocate for them to have voice and safety?

Only once the oppression is called out and halted, and the marginalized are given support — allyship — can an equal debate and meeting of the minds happen. Sitting down with Nazis is an add-on, to be taken on after the work of reassuring those that are and have been for years systematically wounded, excluded, kept silent, trodden over.

The neutrality alignment encourages listening to the most angry. The due-weight counterpoint calls for a more intentional reconciliation and trust-building with the most harmed.

This is where being an ally is about actively compensating for biases that have been there since before we were even conscious of them, or conscious at all. Ally is a verb — an action to be taken in the moments where we can make a difference. It goes beyond seeking neutrality to throwing due weight behind the people who need it most.

Being a spiritual philosopher, a Buddhist-Christian empathizer and a sinner-lover is big hope stuff, when you have the time for it. But we have to stop the fight and get everyone back on their feet before we ask to sit down with the attacker and probe their childhood experiences and miseducation. Especially if we are members of the group doing the attacking.

Let me share an anecdote on where and how I disagree with the neutrality alignment, especially if you carry a lot of privilege as a white person. There was a pseudo-scandal a few years back about a video clip of a Republican politician quoting scripture at church and picking the verse, “The woman should submit to her husband.”

It was a pseudo-scandal because the backlash was based on misrepresentation. In the full video, what the Republican actually said was, “When you have to choose a verse of scripture to live by, I should *not* choose, ‘The woman should submit to her husband’. Instead, I should choose, ‘A woman needs to be empowered to reach her full potential.’”

His point was that while scripture supported both positions, it was incumbent upon him to choose the verse that put him in service to her. When there are concerns that white folks aren’t listening much to other really angry white folks, I think, well, that’s true, but it isn’t really the point for other white people to be making.

There’s lots of scripture, but we should choose the verse that puts the onus *on us*. A white man shouldn’t choose the verse about listening to

the angrier white men; he should choose the verse about allying with the targets of that anger.

For those saying it's incumbent upon white people to take on the role of calling out other white aggressors, as an ally move, that makes a lot of sense. But the framing of "listen to the angry white man" rather than "condemn the hatred and comfort those oppressed by it" seems like missing the moment to put the onus on us, for privileged white folks, to clearly denounce the "sin" itself, and bolster those in the bullseye of that hatred.

I don't hate the people who are Nazis, but I also don't waste much time trying to understand them, when there is great empowerment to be had in calling them out, and so many opportunities for potentially helping those who are hurt and harassed by hateful perspectives.

Strategically the neutrality and due-weight approaches differ strongly, though both are in some way useful. I'm still pretty solid in my thinking that of the two paths white people could be taking, focusing on marginalized people is where we're called to serve.

The task of listening to white anger is not my first priority, if it's a priority at all. It's for someone else, or for me, but later. That's what I'm thinking.

All humans are worthy of love, but who gets our energy first?

Humanager

What I believe about making great teams

Our health doesn't only exist in and emerge from our homes and relationships. For many of us, daily life is dominated by a workplace, an office, a team, or a boss. Whether that environment and that leadership demeans or empowers is critical to the quality of life that determines if our happiness, and even our sanity, is possible.

- I believe in radical candor: kindness + honesty + curiosity + humor
- I believe in most cases you know as much as or more than me
- I believe you deserve to understand why decisions are made
- I believe if we invest in people first we will get to where we want
- I believe we need to have fun to stay effective in our work
- I believe that if there are good results and you feel motivated
- I believe that it should be very rare for me to overrule you
- I believe that it is *my job* to fight for your title and compensation
- I believe that each person has strengths and can build on them
- I believe that each person can grow when they are ready
- I believe talking about hard stuff can become natural and rewarding
- I believe strategy should be an outgrowth of experimentation
- I believe the execution is mostly flexibility and enthusiasm
- I believe real life matters, and work can adjust to accommodate it
- I believe health, wellness, rest, and happiness lead to good work
- I believe work should engage, challenge, and develop confidence
- I believe in giving and sharing credit and recognition widely
- I believe meetings should help us understand and enjoy each other
- I believe structure is less important than getting great things done
- I believe we will surprise each other with what we can do

17 Myths about Being a Good Ally

As you learn to heal yourself, you will arrive at a new awareness of the pain and oppression of others in society. You may want to help fix their problems. Here are some myths that might get in your way of effectively and ethically doing that.

1. An ally is a good person with the right views

An ally does the right things that help people who need it. Having progressive politics and being able to espouse the theory behind them is really neither here nor there when it comes to allyship. Allyship, as many before have wisely said, is about action. Ally is a verb. It's not an identity or a philosophy or a status or a rank. You aren't a good ally before you act; you're not a good ally until you act. And even then, your allyship depends on what you continue to do, when it counts, when it's hard, when it helps. No one gets an ally badge to keep for life; it just appears magically whenever you're allying. "Allies" who don't walk the talk can even be dangerous in communities where they speak lovely words and gain acceptance while subverting others in practice. It's what you do that makes you an ally.

2. An ally deserves praise

An ally helps repair injustice through support and speaking up. An ally doesn't deserve praise for this, because it's just trying to get us to a baseline world of equity for everyone. That should be the starting point, so you don't get super-mega brownie points for picking up the emotional and historical trash that litters our social environment. You're supposed to pick up trash – we all share this planet! On top of that, what an ally may earn is access to spaces where people wouldn't otherwise feel comfortable with them. This access opens the possibility for rich relationships with passionate, life-experienced, diverse people. That is the best reward (but not one you can expect or demand either).

3. An ally never gets praise

Allies can get a lot of praise — sometimes even too much. Allies are often seen as standouts among their privileged cohort, even if what they do should be normal. Allies can be appreciated, even publicly — you can't expect or demand praise, but do humbly enjoy it when it happens. Just say thank you and keep doing good work. It's okay to want to be a good ally. It's not okay to make that *want* another *need* that people have to fill.

4. An ally never makes mistakes

Allies are about action. Action means imperfection, especially in challenging areas with diverse people and complex histories and the vulnerabilities that come from oppression and marginalization. An ally who stays involved is bound to mess up in small or large ways from time to time. The key is to pause, listen, acknowledge, apologize, reflect, and try again. An ally is doing work outside of their cultural comfort zone, so it's natural and inevitable to get things wrong. You can try to educate yourself as you go — even better if you don't rely on those you're trying to help to do all the educating for you. Talk to other allies, read online, and accept that it's a gradual journey to being a better ally.

5. An ally doesn't have their own problems

Everyone has problems. Being human is hard. An ally can have many minor gripes or major challenges. Being an ally is not about having, or having had, a perfect life. Being an ally is about showing up for others. It doesn't mean denying your own struggles. It means you appreciate that with all of the struggles you have, others have the difficulty cranked up on life even higher, every day, automatically. You're running uphill, but others are running up mountains. You have fancy hiking boots and wind-proof gear, but others are in flip-flops and a t-shirt. You can stop and take breaks, but others have to not fall even a step behind. There are levels of hard, and there are systems that make some kinds of hard more entrenched, oppressive, and inescapable than others.

6. An ally can't share their own stories

Allies don't have to be invisible. You do have to be aware of your presence. There are times when putting the focus on you takes it away from those who need to be centered and heard. There are other times where your sharing builds important mutual understanding and creates opportunities for learning. Allies don't have to hide, they just shouldn't prevent others from being seen.

7. An ally can't make jokes

An ally can say a lot of things if they have built trust. Allies don't have to be serious and they shouldn't be sanctimonious. Allies can use humor to great effect. Self-deprecating humor is fantastic for lowering people's inhibitions. Good jokes reduce the anxiety people feel when they are in awkward situations of social inequality and power imbalances. Humor works when it is informed by real relationships. It's important to be truthful and present first — sometimes humor can even reveal and develop that. That said, if your joke falls flat or offends others, it's on you, not the people who 'didn't get it'.

8. An ally has to remain silent

A good ally is thoughtful and decisive about when to speak. One of the most important things an ally can do is to speak loudly against oppressors and take on those confrontations so others don't have to. An ally can make a big impact when speaking in private and in small groups. Silence in public forums is about listening, making room, holding space for others — a noble and sacred practice and far more than merely an absence of words. An ally realizes that many voices have been shut out or shut up — and does their best to make environments where that doesn't happen again.

9. An ally has to sacrifice themselves for others

An ally is generous with their privilege. Getting to help others is tremendously rewarding. Getting to know people outside your small or

homogeneous social circles is enlightening and enlarging. An ally is not a martyr. An ally is a co-conspirator who understands when to help and when to get out of the way.

10. An ally can only help those with less privilege

One of the most important things an ally can do is help inform, teach, call in, and model positive behaviors for people with more privilege. An ally doesn't have to be hanging out with all the people of color or low-income people or LGBTQIA+ people to make a difference. An ally can have great impact in their privileged groups and be a leader in those spaces and conversations. This is often harder than hanging out with all the cool activists and colorful world-changers. It risks social status, and it means constantly confronting old ways of harm and oppression. An ally can help those with less privilege by doing the work of bringing along those with more privilege. An ally can make more allies!

11. An ally has to be ashamed of their privilege

If every person could have the privilege of a cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, neurotypical, rich, white, educated man from the global north, they'd be right to enjoy the heck out of it. People don't fight against oppression because they hate good times, having fun, indulging, or enjoyment. People fight against oppression because it hurts others and stops people from having basic safety and rights. An ally can enjoy their life, and appreciate it even more for realizing what they have and have access to. It's better to enjoy the benefits of your privilege than to take them for granted. It's even better to use your privilege to help others. But you can do both. Marginalized activists need to find time to relax and live up life — and so do allies.

12. An ally is immune from criticism

Being an ally is not a shield from messing up and being called out on it. A bad ally, an ally who does more harm than good, an ally who is unwilling to learn or is demanding of praise — they can and often

should be criticized. Even good allies with good intentions can get whacked with the news that they too screwed up. Even good allies with histories of positive interactions can hurt, harm, or offend. When this happens, criticism is the communal immune system seeking to repair that hurt. Let the criticism happen and don't deny or deflect it. Take it in, move on, and work out a better way.

13. An ally is someone who only serves others

An ally is someone who at best connects with others and joins them in their quest. The goal isn't merely flipping power structures: the goal is building a more whole, just, and empowering world. An ally who does all the grunt work but never gets to know and like and laugh with the people they are trying to help is missing some of the best parts of being an ally. That said, don't expect or demand friendship. It's a deeply gratifying bonus, not a requisite kickback. There is no expectation of reward, but you may find it a life-affirming side-effect. Being an ally can feel really, really good — and that's okay.

14. An ally can operate independently

There's really no such thing as an ally without someone they're allied with. An ally should have a connection to the real, actual, human people they are trying to support. This means going beyond generalities and stereotypes and actually interacting with people you want to empower. An ally is not a solitary or isolated person; they can't be. Ally is a helping verb and you need to be helping someone to be an ally.

15. An ally is always an ally

While privilege doesn't disappear, it does shift depending on the situation and context. You might be an ally in one area, but need an ally in another. You might be straight and white but struggling with mental health and poverty. *Intersectionality* provides latitude and flexibility in how allies can view the overlapping and intertwined matrices of privilege. This may sound confusing, but it means that awareness and details matter as much as absolutes. Your role can change depending

on who you are with, and that requires and builds a sensitivity to multiple threads and axes of privilege.

16. Being an ally is the hardest work

Being an ally is confusing and messy and humbling at times. But a wise woman once said: if you think being an ally is hard, try being the oppressed! Allies have the privilege of getting to step in and out of battles when they choose to, when they feel like it, when it's convenient, or when it's overwhelming. But a Black woman can't escape her Blackness, nor a trans person their gender identity. An ally clocks in and out and goes home to their family for a meal and a shower, while oppressed people are always somehow on the job. Being an ally is a challenge, being the oppressed is exhausting.

17. An ally knows how to be a good ally

No one really knows how to be a good ally in every moment, because being an ally is a creative, radical approach to changing culture. There's no formula for this, though there are useful guides and tips. An ally is inventing and evolving as they practice allyship. Like a jazz musician, an ally learns to play the instrument of their privilege in improvisation with the people and the world around them.

Lives Less Linear (Part 1)

Based on a 2023 interview with Isabella Fredrickson for KZSC 88.1 FM Santa Cruz on the show Late to the Party, the radio show that champions the lives less linear.

A big thing I've learned about mental health is the importance of sitting together in a group with other people and having one person tell their story and having everyone else just listen and support them. That's why I chose the title *Welcome to the Circle* for my first book, because I firmly believe that by listening to each other, we can grow and we can heal.

I work with communities and organizations. We often do story circles, where for seven minutes you have to tell the story of how you were born to how you got to where you are now, and you go around in a circle, one person after another. It's amazing every time. You can't tell the whole story in seven minutes. So every time you do it, it's a little different.

I usually start my own story with Philadelphia, baseball, Jews, and some notion of "excellence". That is, I grew up in mainline Philadelphia, which is an upper-class, wealthy, well-heeled, well-educated suburb in the Philadelphia area. My childhood had a lot of baseball games, and it had a lot of Jewish culture, and it had a lot of a kind of insulated safety and striving for excellence in whatever we did.

From an early age, not because I was forced to but because it was rewarded, I just wanted to be competitive at school and at sports. I remember in school, in second grade, we had a competition to see who had the *sharpest, finest* mechanical pencil. That was a really lame battle, but just another day for us.

There was an equal emphasis on physical and academic excellence. We tracked who was the fastest, who could do the math problems the

quickest, who had the best lunch. It was a naturally competitive atmosphere.

Because I was talented as a young person, and driven, and had a lot of support from my parents, I ticked a lot of boxes growing up. I was a good student. I was a good athlete. I had girlfriends from the time I was three until I was 23. The surface-level appearance was a thriving kid. I relied a lot on feeling valued by others. It was really motivating to get that appreciation from people around me.

Every kid reads their community to see what's valued. Some kids reject it and don't play the game. Other kids, if they're positioned to do well, try to play the game and win. I did.

I also had a really just rich family life with lots of games and laughter. My parents were at every sporting event — every single sporting event, both of them. We had a lot of support and a lot of love.

It wasn't until middle school that I started to feel that something was off. I had no words for it, and I had no one to talk to about it. When I was in sixth grade, I was a happy, popular kid, but I remember one day hiding in the bathroom to eat lunch. I was hit by this overwhelming social anxiety, and my only hope was that no one would come into the stall and find me there eating out of a paper bag because I didn't want to deal with my peers.

It was uncharacteristic of me. I was a very social kid. But something began happening between 11 and 14 where I started having bouts of extreme anxiety. Increasingly, it was like my head was something I had to contend with. My thoughts were a formidable competitor. They had served me well in math class, but now they were coming back and they wanted something from me. And I had no idea what to do.

I continued to excel until my senior year of college. I managed to thrive while masking the anxiety and periodic depression or mood variability that characterized my growing up. I don't think anyone around me really recognized its depth, even my parents. It's not like I was hiding it. I just thought this was an *internal* problem, like it didn't exist outside of my own perception. There were very few people who had any glimpse of it. It wasn't really until everything broke when I had to start talking about how bad it had become.

I fashioned myself as the counselor growing up. I helped friends and even my own parents through some of their problems. I thought I was good: good morally, good academically, good socially. I thought, *I'm not the one who has problems.*

It didn't fit. I had no framework for the notion that someone who was succeeding externally, valued by others, could have issues. I didn't understand that hiding in a bathroom or spending all afternoon trying to figure out how to resolve a conflict in my thoughts was not exactly normal or healthy. I reasoned it was just part of what makes me who I am. And that was okay until the pieces just didn't fit anymore.

I grew up in a college-obsessed part of the U.S. There's now many college-obsessed parts of the U.S, but in the 90s it was more localized to certain highly ambitious communities that were well-resourced enough to pay for SAT tutoring and admissions advisors. I really tweaked my high school resume, a horrible word for one's childhood; my college application was extremely strong by design. I was treasurer of my school class. I was a three-sport athlete, and I had specialized in wrestling.

Wrestling was the place where I really had to confront my anxiety demons directly for the first time. It was excruciating. It was just me and a bomb of nerves. But I learned a lot through the kind of lone combat of the sport.

Where I grew up, it was all about school and excelling in school to get to become a lawyer or go to Goldman Sachs and become a financial analyst or something. It was a very, very limited sense of success. You could be a doctor. There was a limited sense of what the *really* successful people do. Even that framing is gross. But this is an area that had all of the money of the rail lines running through Philadelphia and New York dating back to the 1800s. Old money and a lot of expectations.

Culturally, with my Jewish roots (though I'm not religious), there was a huge emphasis on literacy, reading, learning and debate as hobbies. My friends and I used to talk politics constantly. I used to read *The New Yorker* for fun in high school. For whatever reason, I thought it was my job to educate myself about the world, more than to educate myself about myself.

I was preparing for pre-law or pre-politics or pre-something before I had any concept of my own boundaries and vulnerabilities and faults. I was like a little mini CEO, reading two newspapers each morning and then six news websites. I had an interest in the world and world affairs, but I was afraid of or unsure how to point the light inward.

When I looked at colleges, I did well. I got into tons of schools. I was ultimately drawn to a liberal arts school in Connecticut called Wesleyan University, which is known for being a place where you can explore multiple things at once. You can explore your identity, you can explore your sexuality, you can explore substances and drugs. You can explore academics. It was a very rare, special environment (granted, still with lots of wealth, and ambition). Among the so-called "elite" schools, it was a place where it seemed I could explore who I was without having to narrow down so many contradictions. It was a bigger box.

I felt like Wesleyan encouraged real diversity, in opinions, in dress, in tastes of music. I wanted that, because I didn't know what I was going to become. And I had a feeling that I might have to go outside of the boundaries of what I knew in order to be comfortable.

I wanted a school where I could--I don't want to say I could fall apart, because I had no idea what was going to fall apart--but I wanted a school where I could radically differ from what I had been before. And where that would be okay. It would be welcomed, and it wouldn't be judged. I had this inkling that I needed to choose a school that was academically excellent, but culturally much more open. And that was Wesleyan.

This is the beginning, in some ways, of going west and finding (eventually) California, and becoming a mental health advocate, and encouraging a failure-forward mentality. What I mean by that is, can you put yourself in an environment where failure will not harm you or will even advance you? First of all, I wanted to be in an environment where failure was even an *option*. And by failure, I think I don't mean failure at school or sports. I just mean failure to conform to the expectations I had for my own life. That was the first hint that my rigid, narrow box was starting to crack. At the time, I thought, *I need this*. Of course, I didn't know how much it was going to crack.

Even as a creative, diverse place, Wesleyan was considered to be within the pantheon of acceptable "great" schools. The tragedy I talk about with my wife a lot is that we both could have gotten free rides to slightly less prestigious schools in the midwest or the south. And I instead chose to saddle me and my parents with tens of thousands of dollars of student loan debt. This was the illness of growing up in a place that's obsessed with "excellence".

My ambitious peers and I felt like we had sacrificed a lot of our childhood years, our teenage years. Instead of screwing around and

really screwing up, we dreamed about something horrible befalling us so we would have a topic for our college essays. I'm joking, but I'm not totally joking. There were remarks, like "Oh, his parent died, so he'll have no problem with his college application essay." Oh my God, *we were insane*.

Or you could pay for a hard experience. My college admissions essay was about a sweat lodge ceremony I took part in as a 17-year-old on a trip through the Weminuche wilderness in Colorado. That was a \$4,000 trip my parents sent me on to an outdoor backpacking camp. If you didn't have real adversity, you could manufacture it by sitting in a tarp-covered tent with a fire in it for three hours until you almost passed out. It was an amazing trip, but there's also a sickness there, the whole thing.

I continued to thrive academically at Wesleyan, especially because I found an amazing program called the College of Social Studies. It was basically old, dead white philosophers from Western Europe who, by some people's measure, are the founders of Western civilization and everything good in modern society. But for me, it was just books with lots of ideas.

I really liked talking to dead people. I would write hundreds of notes in the margins of these books by Hobbes and Locke and Rousseau. I thought these conversations mattered. I didn't know a lot. I thought reading great books is what you should *do* in college.

I had a course where they would give you 300 to 600 pages of reading on Monday, and on Friday you had to hand in an essay about it. It was like that for 30 weeks. We read thousands of pages, we read dozens of books, and we wrote a new essay every week. You learn to pretend to be an expert on the spot. I call this training essentially pre-law, because in law you have to digest a ton of information quickly and then write authoritative briefs to persuade others.

You get so in the habit of doing it that it becomes a hyper-literacy. I don't mean that in a good way. It's like stretching a joint beyond its natural range. I was trying to optimize for that. I taught myself how to speed read, and I could read between 700 and 1000 words per minute. There was a ridiculous sound that would come from my room. I used a metronome that would go...

tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-tick.

It triggered the eye movements across the page. I would sit there drinking my green tea, reading hundreds of pages a day. And I was so content to do that. I was steeping in these ideas.

Intellectual history is fascinating. There's a quote that goes something like, whenever a politician announces something in 2020, it's really just the regurgitation of a philosopher who died 300 years ago. There are roots that connect us to these thinkers. Thoughts and ideas are important: they influence things, and people often use them as weapons. So, it is helpful to know what has been written and thought before, even if it's problematic.

And there are big problems with that kind of curriculum. It's very, very Western. It's very male. It's very white and colonial and all kinds of things. But it was so much fun for me. It was like candy. I loved it.

And at the same time, here I am, I'm at college, and I'm sitting in a room alone.

tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-tick...

There was an intense, almost monastic isolation that was starting to characterize phases of my life where there was less balance, less regular socializing. I met good friends at college, who not only am I still friends

with today, but who helped save my life. And I still believed that the most important thing I was getting out of college was the books by dead people.

I also knew, deeper down, that wasn't right or that was not enough. I'm not supposed to just read the books by dead people and then play *Halo*.

I always thought I was going to be a lawyer. Not necessarily a politician, but some kind of lawyer, probably in the public interest area. Some kind of good law, not corporate law, which I thought was part of the problem.

I've always been mission-driven. I always wanted something where not only could I sleep at night but when I woke up in the morning, I wasn't in any way unclear about why I wanted to start the day. I really struggle to motivate myself for an organization or a cause or a boss I don't care about. It's a privilege to be able to say that. And yet it's true. And everyone should have the privilege to work on a cause they care about. I've made certain sacrifices and gotten very lucky to be able to do that.

Interestingly, in order to go that mission-driven route, I had to really *miss* this target of law school. Come senior year, all my friends were studying for the LSAT. They were timing themselves. They were waking up at 8 am, which is very early for a college student, as seniors, taking an hour-and-a-half intensive logic test, every day for two weeks, to prep for what it was going to be like to take the LSAT.

And I was not there. I just wasn't there. And I never got back to it.

I had thought for so long that law school was definitely what I was going to do. I wanted to be a lawyer. I wanted to help people with better regulations, better legislation. I wanted to fight for people who need help. I wanted to explore the ideas that influence the environment and

technology and immigration and labor, all those things. And then, what I thought was going to do all along didn't happen.

Love happened and then breakdown happened. And then I was hospitalized.

The Ally's Creed

I am an ally because of what I do to help others. I don't do this work for praise, though it is rewarding for me. I learn through mistakes. I recognize my privilege: living free from many but not all forms of disadvantage and systemic oppression or exclusion. I make space and empower more marginalized people to be seen and heard. I speak and act to make more allies out of those with privilege like me. I am a co-conspirator for those I am trying to help, without shame or defensiveness. I am an ally because of what I do to help others.

How to Decide How to Quit

I've made a handful of seminal decisions that changed the course of my journey.

The decision to start wrestling in middle school.

The decision to go to Wesleyan for college.

The decision to come home from Colorado in my 20s.

The decision to take meds at the mental hospital.

The decision to talk to Siko at Wikimania in D.C.

The decision to move to Santa Cruz.

The decision to leave the Wikimedia Foundation.

The decision to write *Welcome to the Circle*.

The decision to quit the e-cigarette I puffed on 500–1000 times per day over eight years was another.

Here are some tips for others seeking to make a change.

Do Other Stuff. Other Stuff Exists. Do Some of That Stuff.

- Allow for cravings to arise — and recede.
- Wait. Wait more.
- Go for walks.
- Convert angst and energy to something new.
- Discover how many pleasures there are.
- Take your meds.
- Write down your rage.
- Don't look too far ahead.
- Find multiple paths to happiness.
- Distract yourself with music.
- Don't look too far behind.
- Call friends and vent.

- Mark your feelings.
- Take naps.
- Get rushes from healthy things.
- Let people praise and support you.
- Eat tasty foods.
- Freak out. Then reach out.
- Treat yo'self!
- Consider the size of the change you made.
- Ask for help.
- Cry and breathe.
- Celebrate forgiveness.
- Think of a funny story.
- Soak in the bath.
- Watch a silly comedy.
- Drink a lot of water.
- Listen to a podcast.
- Pick up a new book to read.
- Go somewhere private and yell as loud as you can.
- Be patient with yourself.
- Feel good about how much progress you've made.
- Spend time around nature.
- Drink good coffee.
- Reassure yourself you'll be okay.
- Join a support group.
- Share your story.
- Get advice.
- Give your brain time to heal.
- Snuggle a pet.
- Notice tension in your body.
- Observe negative thoughts.
- Take it slow.
- Find a motto.
- Think of one thing to look forward to.
- Use therapy.

- Talk to others who have quit.
- Affirm that it's hard!
- Don't panic.
- Get a massage.
- Clean and organize.
- Get a hug.
- Take one deep breath.
- Tell a joke.
- Help someone else.

The River

Look upstream. A torrent erupts. The worst thoughts tumble towards you. You're not the thoughts. Let them go through you. The river is a place. Water molecules pass through locations in arrangement. Molecules are mostly empty space. The river still brings life to the banks and the fields. How can a single molecule of water be bad? A river is a collection of molecules flowing near each other. You are a collection of molecules. Be like water. Let the river flow through the place that is you. To love and be rejected causes pain. We evolved to seek belonging and acceptance. For survival. What to do with pain? It's a rock in the river. Where water does not flow. Two options: Be the rock. Feel solidity. What's wrong with a rock? Maybe you need stillness. The water will flow. It doesn't matter; you're the space between the stone. Move the rock out of the way. Either option is just moving molecules around. That flexibility can move mountains, even the mind. What if the river dries up? That water went somewhere. It's still wet. Until there are no molecules together. What if there was no water? There would be no wetness. There would be stone. There would be gas. There would be space. At the end is space. Even when there's no space, there is energy that can never be created nor destroyed. What was before energy? There was no before because there was no time. Only timeless energy. What would be without energy? There would be no world. There would be no awareness of it. There would be no thing and nothing. Even nothing would not be bad. There would be no bad and no one to mark it so. But there is something. Let it flow through you. These are all just words. Words can change how we feel. How we see. We are children playing games with energy. Don't forget to laugh. Childhood is full of joy and wonder. Childhood has fear and sadness. Children grow up. So do you. One day you will not be. The river keeps flowing. Feel wet. Or feel dry. The universe doesn't care. The universe is something you are made of. You are the river and

the stone and the person in the river and the mind playing games with energy. You are human and you are in love. You are dying and you are in pain. You are all of those things: ecstatic, at peace, angry, and in agony. You are dry, and you are wet, and you are the space between the molecules. You are nothing, and you are timeless energy.

From Swats to Licks

Started swiping with her nails

Hissed her teeth and puffed her tail

Came to know me as I stayed

Where I sat she turned and laid

Climbed under the purple blanket

Found a glass and then she drank it

Scratched her back she gave back purrs

Showed her belly full of burrs

Wrestling she bit and kicked

Snuggling she loved and licked

Said goodbye upon her bed

Kissed her face and held her head

Now she's playing underground

With all those loving cats around.

Letter from an Anxiety Coach

Dear Jake,

Dear, dear man.

You have no idea of your fundamental goodness. You have no idea of your depth and your light.

This may be your only true problem.

I meant it when I said that I believe you are on the cutting edge of consciousness.

If your ego likes hearing that, simply ask it to take a seat.

Because what I'm talking about is so much beyond and more important than the ego.

You are not mentally ill.

That's just a construct you've taken on to create a bit of safety for yourself until you can integrate and embrace your power.

It's quite difficult to contain that much power and light in this tiny human body!

And it's fine that you've taken on that construct.

Perfectly fine and perhaps even needed.

For a time.

Mentally ill is what this culture calls truly powerful people.

We believe it.

We believe it until we die...

OR

... we see through it, discard it, and step into our power.

Soon, and very soon, you will be called to step out of that outdated construct because it is suffocating you.

And because I see you...

I do see you...

... I see that you will not die by suffocation.

You will step out.

In time.

Stepping out of it will be frightening and disorienting...

...but only for a moment!

Only for a moment, or maybe three.

But once you pass through the disorientation, you will see more beauty and connect more powerfully than you ever believed possible.

You will come home to yourself and see what all these years have been preparing you for.

They have been preparing you, good and powerful man.

Start looking in this direction, Jake.

With all sincerity and all my love,

Carla

Minute Changes

One good minute can change your hour.

One good hour can change your day.

One good day can change your week.

One good week can change your month.

One good month can change your year.

One good year can change your life.

One good breath can change your minute.

One good breath

Can change your life.

Try That At A Country Lynch Mob

Try That At The Forced Birth Of A 14-Year-Old Girl Who Was Raped By Her Uncle And Had No Access To Abortion Care

Try That At The Rural Murder Of A Gay Man

Try That At The Unprovoked Shooting Of A Black Teen Who Was Just Walking Down the Street Eating Skittles

Try That At A No-Knock Police Assassination Of A Woman Of Color Unarmed In Her Own Home

Try That At A Klan Meeting

Try That At A Migrant Detention Camp For Children In Cages Stolen From Their Lost Parents

Try That After Nine Minutes Kneeling On The Neck Of A Petty Street Salesman Until He Can't Fucking Breathe And Dies With Everyone Watching In Plain Fucking Daylight

Try That In Small Town America

The Last Goodbye to my Grandmother

You're all here!

Wowie!

she says

Cute

He's cute!

How about that???

See you later.

I say

See you later.

she says

I love you

Love you

Good At It

Be careful what you get good at. If I look back, I was always good at everything I did. So are you. It's just that growing up I was good at getting the grades, winning at sports, dating girls, and making everyone like me. Those were what I was good at, even though it didn't mean I was particularly happy.

In college I got good at reading 400 pages per week and writing 40 papers in a year.

Then I got good at staying in a bad relationship.

Then I got good at cutting myself off from everything worth living for. Really good.

Then I got good at being in a mental hospital. I got a lot out of it. Didn't waste it.

I got good at separating from my parents.

I got good at Wikipedia.

I got good at Siko.

You're always good at what you're doing--but what are you doing?

Be careful what you get good at. You're going to be great. But at what?

Mapbook

Mission is the spark of what we do. It's the big why. It's the vision. It's the story. It's the motivation and reason behind our choices. It gives you something to aspire to, something to work towards. Mission is how you know whether you are doing the right thing. In a team, mission is two-fold. There's the external mission, what we're trying to accomplish. There's also the equally important internal mission, for the team and for each individual. The internal mission--to feel valued, to grow, to enjoy and learn from each other--is in and of itself essential. It also helps us achieve the external mission, how we want to impact the world. It's my job to set the mission, and your job to keep us moving towards it, especially if I ever veer off course.

Purpose is your personal mission, and how you fit into the team. It's the way you employ your talents towards our goals. Purpose is knowing what you bring to the team; it's also knowing what you're trying to achieve. When you wake up and come to work, purpose is knowing why you matter. When you take on a project, purpose is knowing how you can advance it. It's my job to make sure you know your purpose (and your worth). It's your job to act with purpose, to use your capacity to affect change.

Boundaries are where we go and don't go. Boundaries tell us when a choice is wrong. Boundaries keep us honest. There are external boundaries, like our scope of work. There are internal boundaries, like how the team agrees to operate and what it collectively will not do. There are also personal boundaries, which are essential to your integrity, dignity, and health. It's my job to make sure you know what the boundaries are, and that includes you knowing that challenging and disagreeing with me are *within* the boundaries.

Choices are what we do. Choosing our goals. Choosing our methods. A good team and a good team member make hundreds of choices a week. Many of them are small. All of them involve some trade-off. Choices are how you navigate within your boundaries, in line with your purpose, and to move us closer to the mission. It's my job to maximize your ability to make choices, and to be there for you when choices are unclear. It's your job to explore the range of choices and make good decisions, in consultation with me when you're not sure.

Mission. Purpose. Boundaries. Choices. I call it "mapbook" for short. A mapbook shows you the landscape. But it also shows you the regions, the pieces that make up the whole. Most importantly, a mapbook shows you multiple angles on the same territory. As a leader, I have to share the mapbook, so we are on the same page. You have to reflect on which maps matter when, and then together we choose the path to get where we want to go.

Litany

All the world's great spiritual and religious traditions are ways to lose
your mind safely

My baby grins when he sleeps
This is of immeasurable comfort

Risk excitement

At the bottom of weakness
Is ecstasy
Ecstasy will creep in through your left pinky toe
If you let it

Pain is not weakness
It's one of the most powerful signals that we are alive

A little bit of freaking out is appropriate

A lot of us have gaslit ourselves

If you want to build a castle on a mountain you're going to have to carry
rocks uphill

My awareness has a body

It is all ephemera

Unvirtuous Circle

With enough money you can buy anything you need anytime you want from anywhere on the planet to remedy the maladies that have been wrought by being able to buy anything you need anytime you want from anywhere on the planet we're destroying.

Turkey

I once accepted the devil into my heart

It was actually quite freeing

And now I occasionally curse people

If they really deserve it

But mostly it's just given me permission to be angry from time to time

Bleeding Heart

Progressive politics has a reputation for weakness and excessive emotionality, whatever that is. But radical critiques of broken systems that harm people are nothing if not strong, compassionate, and full of conviction.

Here's what we fight against:

- Climate change
- Racism
- War
- Inequality
- Genocide
- Capitalism
- Corruption
- Stigma
- Ignorance
- Apathy
- Suffering
- Hatred
- Intolerance
- Corporatism
- Fascism
- Nationalism
- Sexism
- Militarism
- Patriarchy
- Lies

and

- Bullshit

Lives Less Linear (Part 2)

Based on a 2023 interview with Isabella Fredrickson for KZSC 88.1 FM Santa Cruz on the show Late to the Party, the radio show that champions the lives less linear.

I married my girlfriend when I was three, as you do. I married my sixth-grade girlfriend. The term serial monogamist applies to me. But I always felt those previous relationships were immature. Always seeking excellence, I was looking for a bonafide relationship, a longer-term partnership that didn't just fizzle out after a couple of months, the kind of relationship where there's a depth of bond, a rhythm of rapport, a sharing of knowledge and self over time. At college, it turned out I had no idea how to do that.

One of the things that was not talked about in my family, that was almost hinted about in a negative way, was the concept of boundaries. I had no notion of boundaries. I didn't understand that if people did things in a relationship that were harmful, you might want to draw a line around that. And that went both ways, because I certainly crossed lines that I thought were okay. Maybe I felt it was necessary, but any reasonable person from the outside would say, *that's a bad idea*.

It's very part of the discourse today, having boundaries, or why it's okay to set boundaries. There's a really funny quote from a mental health meme about how every nice person who grows up without boundaries has a phase where they discover boundaries, and they think they are pure evil for setting them. The notion is just so foreign to them that they think drawing lines around what other people can and can't do to them is a kind of sin or harm.

I think I fell into one of the traps of some early relationships, which is thinking that honesty without boundaries meant telling *everything* – every thought, every worry, every fear, every desire – to your partner. I

have learned that discretion is a good part of honesty. Also kindness is a good part of honesty. Because when I was 20 and I was in a relationship sharing every thought I had, I was also learning (too late) that I had intrusive thoughts as part of my anxiety disorder.

Intrusive thoughts are a thing that we do not talk about in society. The way intrusive thoughts work is you imagine a taboo and then you think you *are* or *have* the taboo.

I talk about this with my therapist and I've looked at some books about intrusive thoughts. The number one intrusive thought that people have, at least in the US, is that they're a pedophile. You can imagine how debilitating that would be.

Number two, and this is really telling and sad, is that you're gay. It's something that is so highly stigmatized still.

If someone is attracted to minors, that's something they should talk to a professional about and get help with. If someone is gay, congratulations, I hope you have a wonderful romantic life and find satisfaction without persecution or oppression. But it's really interesting that these thoughts plague people who are neither.

Then the third one is harm. Like, I'm going to pick up that knife and actually use it against my partner, or my child; I'm going to drive this car off the road.

OCD is very confusing. Anxiety is very confusing in general because there's this part of your brain that says something is wrong and it goes off. With generalized anxiety, it goes off for no reason at all or any reason at all. For OCD, it goes off because of a specific thing. If I don't count to eight, some bad thing will happen. The part of your brain that's terrified will set off alarms with an intrusive thought. *Oh my God, I'm going to drown my cat.* And then the moral and guilty part of your

brain that feels like you're a bad person goes off. Then you have to process that. And you walk around feeling like you're a bad person--and hiding it.

As I was in this relationship where I was prioritizing honesty above all else, I was also learning and discovering that I definitely had intrusive thoughts, and I was sharing them with my partner--every single one. And meanwhile, we were both learning that we have issues. We were both learning that we had traumas, and we were both getting hurt. This is where I just started going off course.

It's important to realize that what happens when someone goes off course, through breakdown or mental health crisis, is not that relevant *per se* because it's driven by massive brain imbalances and emotional dysregulation. I can describe some of what I went through to give a taste of what it was like, my life and lifestyle. But as with a delusion, it's not really important what the *particular* delusion is. What's important is that a person is going through psychosis and they need support.

My breakdown looked like leaving the law school track behind and going to Colorado. At first it was good. I started a tutoring company. I was the leading tutor in academic and college guidance in Vail, Colorado, another "gourmet" town where people strive for "excellence" with lots of money and resources. That was an easy thing at first, and it was going well. I even had a new girlfriend, and we were having a great time.

Then we had one hiccup, and all of a sudden, I didn't sleep in a bed again for eight years.

I slept on couches. I slept in my car. I eventually started living out of my car. I slept on the floor. I slept in a bathroom. On the floor of a bathroom.

It may sound like that must have been hard. But at the time it wasn't: that's the only place where I felt comfortable. Mental illness can skew your perception of not just what's normal, but also what's pleasurable. For me, being in a cramped bathroom on the cold tile floor with my head nearly on the base of the toilet, remarkably, provided a kind of relief.

My employment got weird, too. I was doing temp work, putting together steel storage sheds, cleaning porta-potties with power hoses and muriatic acid. It was really random work. I had trained my whole life to be a world-class lawyer, yet here I am on a rural mountain in Colorado, wearing a mask so that I can suck the feces out of a plastic toilet 40 times an afternoon.

Part of that departure from the norm was really freeing. It wasn't rock bottom. Cleaning porta-potties wasn't rock bottom; that was honest, albeit dirty work.

It was actually when I moved back home from Colorado to Philadelphia to live with my parents, when I returned to comfort and safety – that's when I really broke down.

There's something about being alone where you can't fully lose it if you're your only source of food. But when I went home, I crawled back into this hole in my parents' attic, and I started living online. That's where the retreat from reality really happened.

I was hiding--really hiding. I was coming out of the bedroom at 4 a.m. to make food until 5 a.m., and then going back to the bedroom, with bungee cords rigged to keep the door shut so that only I could open it. And at the same time, what I was doing online was planting the seeds for the rest of my future and what would happen when I got out of the hospital.

The day I was hospitalized I remember very vividly. I had been editing Wikipedia the night before, because Osama bin Laden had just been killed and I was looking at his article late at night. I went to bed a Wikipedia editor, hiding in my parents' attic. I was sleeping in the bathroom, and my mom had moved out because my parents were separating, and I wasn't really talking to my dad. I went to sleep in my house.

The next morning I woke up to a loud knock on the bathroom door. Two burly men from the county mental health department were standing there. They had come to the house to check on me, to do a wellness check. It really freaked me out. I bolted. I thought, *I'm going to get away. I'm going to go to a shelter in the city. I'm going to do something.* That day I walked 16 miles, trying to blow off steam and make a plan. By the end of the day, I had calmed down and thought, sitting on a park bench, *I'm going to go home and go to sleep.*

As I'm sitting there, a cop comes up and he says, "Are you Jake Orlowitz?" And I said, *Yeah.* And he says, "I need you to come with me." Because my parents had put out, very painfully, a mental health warrant for me to be hospitalized and clinically evaluated. I went to the hospital in handcuffs.

It was funny in a way, because I was pretty high at that point: I was in a *good* mood. I was telling the cop in great and vivid detail as we're driving to the mental hospital that my parents are just obsessed with me being conventionally successful. They're the source of all of my problems. The cop probably didn't have much training in mental health. He thought I was telling a convincing story of suburban grievance. So when we got to the hospital, he said to the people who work there, "What is this about? This guy is clear-headed, he's articulate. Why are his parents giving him such a hard time?"

In order to involuntarily hospitalize someone, you have to tell a judge why. My parents had written an exquisitely detailed letter about how I had lost track of everything and couldn't take care of myself.

So the cop comes back into the room where they had patted me down and he just says, "Why didn't you tell me you've been sleeping in a bathroom for two months?"

Like I had pulled one over on him. I thought, *Listen dude, you're trying to arrest me. I'm not going to make your life easy.* But there's a tremendous amount of denial in mental health, just as there is with addiction. There's a lot of denial with abuse, there's a lot of denial with anything that's so scary that we don't know how to face it. I had a narrative that supported not getting help. And that narrative lasted until I went to sleep that night in the hospital. And then the narrative started to change.

People don't have a good idea of what a mental hospital experience is like. First of all, this was not a cushy rehab. This is county mental health. And I don't say that with any disdain. The people working there are heroes. The staff, the nurses, the aides, the psychiatrists are doing heroic work because it's really hard. And everyone who comes in there is in denial at first and pretty resistant to help.

But something happens when you're around other people who are also deluding themselves. Some cracks start to form in your narrative. There's also no more point in lying because, one, you're trapped. And two, you think, *maybe I should fix this problem that's been hurting me. Maybe I should commit to changing my course somehow.* I was resistant at first. They tried to put me on medications. I didn't want to be on medication. I refused medications the first two days.

Why? Sadly, to me that meant cheating. At life. I thought if I fake happiness, I will be a fake and fundamentally untrue to myself. That

reflects a deep, deep stigma. No one says that about blood pressure medication. I thought if I faked happiness, I might as well not live at all. I wasn't suicidal, but I just thought there was no point.

I had a notion of emotional purity, which I had followed and followed and followed. Where it led me, of course, was to the edge of a mountain cliff, in a cabin alone. And a bathroom floor. And a mental hospital.

You start having conversations with other people, too. The most important conversations often happen between the patients. People admit to each other slowly, *I think I have a problem here*. Or, *this doctor told me about this technique that actually helped*. And you're in a culture in the mental hospital, not of illness, but of healing--people making that transition. There are people who resist, but there are a lot of people who are starting to go, *maybe it's time I change something*.

At one point I was sitting in the mental hospital and I'm looking at this therapist who straight up says, "What's wrong with you?" *I can't tell you*, I say. "Why?" *What if I just pick up this chair and throw it at the wall?* "Is that what you worry about? That you're going to harm something or break something?" *I do*.

And then she said something that really surprised me. "Why don't you think everyone has these thoughts? Why do you think this is unique to you?"

That was a radical notion to me: we all have a degree of bothersome, irrational, absurd or even violent musings at one point or another. Yet some people take them really seriously and get in cycles where you think the thought, and then you think *I'm a terrible person*. Then you push the thought away, then you distract yourself. Then the thought comes back with a vengeance, even harder. And it's part of an OCD complex, but it's very confusing.

I was still resistant to the notion that my thoughts weren't basically demonic, but I started to give myself some space to rethink my path. I remember the portly psychiatrist, who I really liked. He was sitting with me in this basically locked room, like a safe room, where they did therapy. He just looked at me and he goes, "You know, it's not too late to have everything that you want, but one day it will be." And I just got it. I was like, *Oh, if I keep running from everything like this, nothing is going to change.* And after that, everything changed.

I knew I couldn't keep doing what I was doing. I think that's what hitting rock bottom means. It's not like a mental hospital is an unusual place to hit rock bottom. But there are plenty of people who are in and out of mental hospitals for years or decades who don't get it, just like there are people who are in and out of rehab who don't get it. And so for me, rock bottom, to use the Alcoholics Anonymous parlance, was just knowing that I couldn't keep doing what I was doing.

Once I knew that, everything began to fall into place. When I got out of the hospital, I knew I had to stop blaming my parents, though I also knew I had to set boundaries with them. It was hard to do. I didn't know how to do it, but I was in therapy. I started learning how to set boundaries with people who I cared about but whose judgment I was afraid of, or who I expected to approve of me. I needed to tell them no. And that was incredibly hard.

I was very targeted in my therapy. This is maybe an unusual thing people should know. I've been in therapy for 13 years now and I love therapy, highly recommend it. It's super cool, and this is the secret: you don't have to tell your therapist anything you don't want to.

Some people might think, "Oh, that's hiding from trauma", but I don't talk much about college and the years afterwards in therapy because I decided early on that I wanted to focus on what was happening *now*. I liked shifting my focus to the present because I couldn't change the

past, which still felt very uncomfortable. I actually had a therapist say to me, "It's fine to not talk about the past as long as nothing's interfering from it. Then we have to talk about it." *Okay, fine.* I accepted that.

I was in Philadelphia at my dad's childhood home again. It was summer. It was like I was at the bottom of a chasm. But because I was looking up, that was the only way to go. There was *a lot* of room to grow.

I was editing Wikipedia every day, mostly all day. I was writing articles. I was getting deep into political debates. I was getting into policy arguments.

Wikipedia is not something that most people intuitively understand. I got into it in some ways because of my obscure intellectual history studies. Wikipedia has laws, like a nation – hundreds and in some ways thousands of rules. It's not that the community is so strict, necessarily; it's more that everything has been documented over two decades. Wikipedia is a wonderful community which is intellectually rich, and I had virtually no social life still. But I was out. I was out of the hole. I was out of the hospital. I was starting to take medication.

I had a solid therapist. Not someone I really gelled with, but that's another misconception about therapy. I don't think you need to love your therapist. Many people do, and that's brilliant. But you just need someone to hold you accountable and to collaborate with. So I started to get my feet under me. And psychologically, medication was a godsend.

I had this analogy about when I was unmedicated. It was like I had not only no clothes on, but emotionally, no skin. I was so sensitive. A friend could raise an eyebrow at me and I thought they punched me in the face. It was just ridiculous. It was extreme.

A lot of my medications were designed to reduce my sensitivity. Lots of people are trying to become *more* attuned to their emotions, more attuned to the world. But there are people who struggle with the opposite. They're oversensitive, they're overreactive. They're always pulled left and right by what this person says or the weather or the news. For me, my medications were intentionally somewhat dulling, not of my soul, but of that hypersensitivity.

I had a really wise psychiatrist who simply asked me what I wanted to feel. I said, *well, I want a little less anxiety*. She was like, okay, we'll give you a little of this. And I said, *I'm struggling in the winter with low energy and motivation*. And she's said, we'll give you a little of that. Pretty soon I'm on three or four medications, but we're tweaking them and playing with them. From the beginning it was clear that medications are something like knobs you can turn if you don't like them; if you don't like the side effects, you can switch things out. I always felt like it was really important to be an active participant in choosing medications. You're the only one who can tell the doctor, *I don't like this aspect of that medication*.

I've been on medications for 13 years and just recently said to my doctor, "I still need this, but it's a little sedating." And the doctor said, "Well, we'll just give you a similar medication which has a more activating profile." So after being on one medication for 13 years, I switched to a different type of drug in the same class. And it's better.

I Told Her a Thought in Georgia

The trees were tall
The hostel nice
I confessed my wish
Like melting ice

She wasn't strong
She wasn't true
She could bring smiles
Which wouldn't do

She had to skate
With fearlessness
She couldn't be
A joyous mess

Racked by guilt
I told her so
And thus began
The weeks of woe

Three Wise Words

Couples take turns
Kindness is free
Forgiveness is freedom
Helping feels good
Safety enables growth
Slow is smooth
Smooth is fast

Life is long
Leave it better

Can You Repeat That?

Listening is one of the most important things we do as humans. But conversation has *dimensions* – at times subtle, complex, extreme, or varying from moment to moment.

Imagine dealing with a friend's diagnosis of breast cancer.

In one scenario, you just listen, patiently; you hold space. You hear. When your friend is finished speaking, crying, and venting, only then do you speak. You take turns. You take the opportunity to match the solemnity of the moment by emphasizing how you understand and agree and support 100%. You validate. You don't make jokes or trivialize the moment. You give it its due. You are serious.

Now imagine your friend is on her last session of so-far very successful chemotherapy.

In this scenario, your friend begins speaking about their sense of accomplishment and you jump in to offer to host a party. You help. As your friend describes the days of nausea and fatigue ending, you interject with phrases of "Gone!" and "Done!" and "Not again!" You interrupt. When your friend worries that the cancer might come back, you push back that it's no match for her determination and you think she's going to have a long, happy life. You counter. Finally, you make pithy cracks about kicking cancer's ass and how once her hair grows back she'll get back on Bumble. You are silly.

These are two conversations that actually have four axes and eight poles. I want to break them down to think about where on the spectrum of each you want to fall. An artful conversationalist can intuit what is desired in many scenarios. A wise friend or partner will simply *ask* what is wanted or needed, and offer it accordingly.

1. **Hear or Help.** This conversational dimension is about *function*. Does your listening let the person vent, or is it a pretext for giving a solution? Neither is wrong, but mistaking a situation where someone just needs to be heard and responding with a slough of suggestions can be hurtful and make them feel *unheard*, like their emotions never got room to just be. People often mistake silence for weakness or indifference, but wordless presence is a true gift we can offer to those we love.
2. **Turns or Interrupt.** This conversational dimension is about *flow*. A person in the middle of a complex or deeply emotional story may want to just tell it start to finish. Meanwhile, a lighter topic, or a serious topic with someone who trusts you completely, may benefit from interspersed remarks and bits of recollections or perspective. One truth is that *knowing* you won't interrupt someone sharing can make listening an almost sacred act.
3. **Validate or Counter.** This conversational dimension is about *frame*. Do you take on the person's perspective 100% or do you offer a different, even contradictory angle? Validating is a highly underrated, very powerful tool. At the same time, you might sense that a person is ready to be challenged on a long-held limiting belief or a false impression. However, if it's *not* wanted, countering can undermine an already vulnerable exchange.
4. **Serious or Silly.** This conversational dimension is about *feel*. Humor is hard to get right, but done right, it can add warmth and personality and even relief to difficult topics. Of course, done wrong, it can come across as tone-deaf, indifferent, or even mean. Any comedian needs to read the room and play to the audience. It's no different one-on-one.

To show the richness and flexibility of human listening, let's revisit our two original scenarios, but *flip* them.

Imagine again dealing with a friend's diagnosis of breast cancer.

In this scenario, they are distraught about the road ahead, how to manage, what to do. You immediately tell them you'll be there for them, drive them to appointments, watch their kids, make them meals. You help. While your friend is building up a torrent of fear, you respond immediately. You interrupt. Your friend is imagining every worst-case scenario, and you don't let that catastrophic thinking rule the day. You immediately tell her she's going to fight and she's going to win. You counter. Lastly, you bring up a funny memory or inside joke that only she would get and it cracks her up, breaking through the tragedy. You are silly.

Now imagine again your friend is on her last session of so-far very successful chemotherapy.

In this alternate scenario, they are flippant about the risks of recurrence and suggest they won't ever need to see a doctor again. Sensing a deeper fear of life under the shadow of relapse, you just listen to the pain of uncertainty. You hear. Because your friend is sounding especially agitated, you wait until she's completely finished getting out all of her angst. Then you share your thoughts. You take turns. When you speak, you say one thing: "You're right. It sucks. It really sucks. And it's not fair." You validate. With matters of life and death at hand, your tone is clear and direct. You mirror your friend's worries. You are serious.

The point of repeating these scenarios, but flipped, is to show that neither end of each axis is *right*. It depends on context and clues, relationship history, and momentary moods. What matters is

awareness of how you're responding and the ability to *choose*, or if necessary *change*, where you are on the spectrum.

That's key: it's not a one-side-or-the-other situation. There's a big middle, with a nudge towards an answer, a few interruptions, an occasional redirection, and a well-timed quip.

What matters, ultimately, is that you're present, and that you're listening.

Bad Advice for a Good Marriage

I'm not a marriage guru, but I am married, together 10 years, and pretty happy.

Here's some unconventional advice:

Be partially honest. The key to honesty is kindness. This is not permission to lie or omit what your partner needs to know. There's no magic measuring stick, but a good rule of thumb is that if your partner's life or well being will be impacted, they *need to know*. That said, you can deliver what will be helpful in a way that will be heard. Say what needs to be said *without building added resentment while doing so*. You can't avoid hurting your partner if you did something hurtful, but you can avoid tripling the injury in how you tell them. Similarly, if you need to critique your partner, do it in a way that supports their growth. Kindness also gives you permission to leave out the mind's sexual detritus, dark fantasies, irrelevant compulsions, and fleeting fears. These are great fodder for therapy, but you can faithfully and honestly keep them from your partner. You'll both be happier for it.

Say sorry when you're right. The best things in life are free, but sorry often feels so expensive... to our egos. Leave ego behind and try offering up a plain, clear, apology in a situation where you feel you were right but both people are hurt or angry. This one simple trick can break down emotional logjams, free dammed rivers of enmity, and return you and your partner to a state of connection and calm. Don't play an arms race with love, don't play a game of chicken with anger. Just say, "I'm sorry I hurt you" and see what flows next.

Go to bed furious. Whoever thought of the maxim, "never go to bed angry" clearly never tried to resolve an excruciating and inflamed disagreement at 1am in the nighttime. You're already overstimulated,

losing impulse control, feeling desperate pressure to find resolution, and growing more and more irate with every slip of the tongue. Let me give you permission to sigh with frustration, roll over, grunt "goodnight" and get some damn shuteye. What happens to the blood pressure over the next 6-8 hours will be wonderful for the morning walk and talk you can have with your equally well-rested partner. Then, with equanimity and readiness, you can reiterate what was so bothersome to you, over coffee, and a freshly buttered croissant, and a side of fresh-squeezed hopefulness.

Fight, a lot. Fights are a sign of a vibrant dynamic, and like a challenging workout, they are essential for keeping the wheels of a relationship turning smoothly – *if* they are done fairly. For like a bad, punishing workout, a cruel fight can leave injuries, wounds, and scars that will not be forgotten. What boundaries frame a fair fight will vary from couple to couple, but a few general tips are: 1) don't curse or call names; 2) don't invoke comparisons to people's parents; 3) don't bring up old stuff that's not relevant; 4) don't keep score; 5) don't threaten separation or breakup unless you're dead serious; 6) obviously, no physical violence. It's also helpful to have a "counseling trigger", something that if said or done will irrevocably lead to joint therapy. While this is entirely healthy, it also acts as a discouragement to slinging wild words and careless or reckless actions.

Keep separate bank accounts. Maybe you're a spy and your partner can't find out. Obviously you need your own ATM card. I kid, but the reality is that each member of a relationship needs at least *some* money that is just theirs to spend however they want with no judgment from their partner. This could be a "fun fund" situation, or it could be the inverse, where each partner has equal accounts and both contribute from that to a "joint expenses" budget, keeping the remainder for themselves. It's critical that a little bit of retail therapy doesn't involve guilt, recriminations, or invidious comparisons, and all it takes is a little extra paperwork at the bank.

Have mediocre sex. If you aspire to have "mediocre" sex, you will have sex even when you are tired, not quite aroused, a little bit distracted, or partially angry. You'll have sex even if you had a hard day, are stressed out, can't get your mind off work, or are holding a grudge. You'll have... a lot more sex. And *permission* to have a lot more mediocre sex inevitably increases the odds of having a lot more *great* sex. One way to think of these suboptimal dalliances is "practice sex", where there is no pressure to get it right, get off, or get it at all. Practice makes better. Mediocre makes magnificent.

Why the silence?

I remember waking up that cool May day in 2002. The window was cracked open, letting in a breeze. A large bong sat in the corner, a giant converted 3-foot plastic Coke bottle, once filled with \$280 in coins, now rigged with lug nuts and an industrial plastic tube.

My mom walked in, surprised by the chill. Surprised by the bong. Surprised that I was still sleeping at 1pm on a Saturday home from my freshman year of college.

Thus began the deluge. I thought I was in trouble. For the bong. For the carelessness. For the engineering.

It wasn't that at all. It was much worse.

What unfolded, with little ceremony, while I was still lying in bed, was a family history, recited for the first time in my memory, of who had died, had depression, suffered addiction, committed suicide, abused pills, had a nervous breakdown, or gone... crazy.

This was news to me. I thought my relatives and ancestors were smart, reliable stock. I didn't know they were oppressed by anxiety, melancholy, manic-depression, substance abuse, erratic behavior, self-harm, and the like.

Then my parents delivered the killing blow. You can't smoke weed, they said, because you could be next. Like them.

Damn. That was much harsher than being punished. That was a life sentence.

Later that day I took a walk with my father. "The thing about limits," he told me, in an act of tautological terrorism, "is that you don't know when you've hit them until it's too late." He was satisfied he had given me fair warning. Watch out. You could go too far before you even know it.

Damn. *How does that help me navigate reality?*

I wonder now, a solid 20 years later, about that day, about its suddenness and its severity, about its revelations. About the 20 years of silence that had preceded it.

Why were we now talking about mental health and family history, intergenerational trauma and addictive personalities? Wasn't it a little *much*? Wasn't it a little *late*?

Why were we hearing about the dangers of weapons after the trigger was pulled? Why were we hearing about black lung after going down into the mine?

Why the silence?

If stigma is the cage of mental illness, silence is the lock.

Stuck in silence, you can't find the key. You can't even see the bars. You are invisibly penned in, and inevitably destined to cross over a limit into the electrified metal rods that surround you.

Silence is the marching orders of stigma; it's the way it travels.

Unable to hear, you can't challenge the oppression. You can't avoid the pitfalls. You are set to wake up one day, hospitalized, or addled from benzo withdrawal, or overcome by two parents speaking in prophecy about your future.

Breaking silence is an act of rebellion. It is a shattering of a cage. If we are wise, we will remove our loved ones from the cage before we bash it to pieces. If we are kind, we will start early, when they are young enough to slip through the gaps and walk free.

Silence is violence. If stigma is the gun, silence is the bullet. When we speak about mental health, we disarm the gun, empty the chamber, clear the magazine. That way, when we wave it carelessly around like the new kid at the gun range, nobody gets shot.

How to Get off the Medications That Saved Your Life

I'm going to be brutally honest with you: don't do it. Turn around. Go back. Don't read any more of this miserable piece. Don't listen to your aunt who practices reiki. Don't listen to your friend whose dad did ayahuasca that one time. Don't listen to your judgy little sister who thinks "it's just more natural to use herbs". Don't listen to your therapist who thinks some more healing of childhood wounds might change your patterns. Don't even listen to your wife who wonders, "Do you really still need those?" Don't read any further; you'll just be disappointed. And finally, don't listen to me. I attempted to come off my medications a few times, some far more disruptive than others, and they're still the bedrock of my daily mental health. In any case, here's what you need to know if you're going to try.

1. **Go slow.** Go so slow it's not just unbearable, it's unnoticeable. Take 12 months to cut the anti-depressant in half. What's the rush? You're already happy. Oh, you're fat and can't orgasm? Right. But still, go slow. Go slow enough you end up chopping pills into eighths and eye-balling which sliver is big enough. Go so slow you get a compounding pharmacy to make your anxiety medication a liquid that you can consume in atomized droplets. Go. Slow.
2. **One at a time.** Polypharmacy--the practice of taking multiple psych meds--is incredibly common. You're going to have to prioritize which one to come off of first. Come off the drug with the worst side effects. Come off the drug with the least benefit. Come off the drug with the easiest withdrawal. Come off the drug with the least long-term usage data... any of these are reasonable strategies.

3. **Prepare to regress.** Withdrawal from psych meds is not dissimilar from quitting an addictive substance. It's hard. It gets harder. It sucks. And then you're free. Sometimes withdrawal has its own effects that are miserable. Sometimes withdrawal reveals and restores old patterns in chemistry, thinking, behavior, and mood that you thought had faded. There's no way to know if you can handle the effects of withdrawal unless you try. But don't expect it to be *easy*.
4. **Have a therapist.** Life is hard enough to warrant a therapist at any time, but especially now that your chemical guard is down and you're experiencing flashbacks from long-past wounds and instincts. Tell the therapist what you're planning to do in advance, and that you want them to support you through it. Let them know what comes up for you and expect to need more time than usual to work through it.
5. **Follow your psychiatrist.** Despite abounding conspiracy theories, many psychiatrists would love you to not need them any more. But you have to tell them that you want to come off your meds, that you're willing to *taper*, slowly and responsibly, that you'll report any unusual withdrawal effects or return of symptoms, and that you'll be *honest* if it's just not working. Use your psychiatrist as a master of knowledge about quitting psych meds--they do in fact know about side effects, about long-term usage research, about withdrawal tendencies, and about alternatives to what you're taking. Your psychiatrist is not the enemy. Remember, all this time they were helping you live a sane and solid life.
6. **Tell your partner.** Don't go it alone. Let your close family and friends know that you'll be unusually sensitive, emotional, irritable, and generally mentally unwell for a while as you

transition back to "regular" chemical functioning. Give people a chance to understand why you're suddenly snapping or foggy or just off. Don't expect more slack, necessarily, but do request some patience and compassion.

7. **Don't Google.** I'm serious about this. There are thousands of "anti-psychiatry" pages on the Internet that want you terrified of your meds and mad at your doctor. I don't know or care if they're right or wrong; I know they use scare tactics, pseudoscience, and fallacious arguments to make vulnerable people feel guilt, danger, and pressure to make rash decisions. Here's a hint: even the most ethical "alternatives to psychiatry" websites will acknowledge how hard and dangerous suddenly stopping psych meds is. If a website doesn't *at least* do that, run.
8. **Give your brain time.** Even if we assume psych meds are amazing and effective, cutting a powerful substance out of your system means your brain and each of its neurotransmitters are going to have to *adjust*. Call it healing or unlearning or detoxifying or resetting... it has to happen. Believe your brain can change and let it adapt to life without the same chemicals.
9. **Quit quitting.** Not working? Too hard? Distracted from your responsibilities? Can't function, focus, work? Too angry to talk to people? Too sad to get out of bed? Go back. Back on your meds. You can try again. Later. Another day. When you're stronger, or life is quieter, or your horoscope is better suited to courageous transitions. You're not a quitter if you quit quitting. I said it. There's nothing wrong with being on medications, even for your entire life.

Lives Less Linear (Part 3)

Based on a 2023 interview with Isabella Fredrickson for KZSC 88.1 FM Santa Cruz on the show Late to the Party, the radio show that champions the lives less linear.

The part I haven't mentioned, the real heart of the story, is how I met my wife. It's going to sound like there was some kind of scandal involved, but really, it was just love.

I was in Philadelphia, getting better and better at Wikipedia. I was not only understanding the community and the norms, I was starting to participate in bigger debates, lead discussions, organize projects. I was training people; I was writing guides. I was living with my dad, not making any income. He was supporting my expenses. I had abilities, but I had no other desire than Wikipedia. I needed to somehow make money doing this or I had to stop and get a job.

There was a new Wikipedia funding initiative called Individual Engagement Grants, and it was run by someone named Siko. I knew I needed to get into this program, because it was the only way for me as an individual to get paid for my time to continue working on Wikipedia projects.

It just so happened that in the summer of 2012, Wikimania, which is the global annual Wikipedia conference, was in Washington, D.C. It was a bus ride away from Philadelphia, and it was coming up soon.

I put it off and put it off. The day before, I decided, *I have to go*. I booked a last-minute hostel. I got on the bus the next day, and I showed up in Washington, D.C. in the swampy, 100-degree heat. I carted my suitcase all around the city sweating through my shirt.

The first night there was a gorgeous gala hosted by Google at the Library of Congress. In the first group of people I talked to, there was Siko. *I'll ask her for money later*, I thought.

The next day I went to the Grand Ballroom at George Washington University. I started walking around the buffet, talking to Siko, this most critical person, and I realized, I was completely high. Hundreds of other people stopped existing in the room. I was enamored.

I got the grants. Siko supervised the grants. She was a great boss, a cunning, excellent project manager. She helped me get things done. Smartly and well. At some point, formal recusal paperwork was filed away in company cabinets. The corporate signifier of "going steady".

She was in California, in Santa Cruz. I was in Philadelphia, at my dad's. We were meeting up to have dates wherever there's a Wikipedia conference. We had a date in Berlin, and then we had a date in Hong Kong, and then later we had a date in Montreal, South Africa, and Portugal.

We were both legitimate hardcore Wikipedia movement organizers. It just so happens we're falling in love. And we were dating all over the world. We're staying in nice hotels, eating global cuisine. Most couples never get to do this. Or they do it on their honeymoon, maybe, if they're lucky. But that was our *courtship*.

The normal part of our relationship began when I moved out to California. I visited one January. And anyone who lives in Santa Cruz knows that sometimes there's the week winter forgets to be winter. When I arrived it was 70 degrees and blissfully sunny. Siko made me poached eggs with smoked salmon and sour cream on greens with honey mustard for breakfast--she was working it.

Within six months, I bought a one-way ticket to California and didn't go back.

That was how Wikipedia led me to my wife, the more important part of my recovery. Relationships are the foundation for growth, for sure.

—

Next, let me bring the story forward to the present, both for Wikipedia, and my broader family-filled life.

There are two distinctions I'd make about Wikipedia. First of all, a Wikipedia consultant is someone who is really good at Wikipedia. But a Wikipedia consultant is *not* a paid editor, like someone who works for a PR company and gets paid to make bad guys look good, or to make a small record producer look like a really big record producer – to bias things.

Wikipedia is all about neutrality. It's all about representing the world as it appears in good sources, not the way you want it to appear. It's not about minimizing the negative or maximizing the positive.

As a Wikipedia consultant, I am mostly an organizer and a capacity-builder.

Wikipedia is this incredible place. There's a whole *Wikimedia* movement, which is all about sharing open knowledge. Many nonprofit organizations have a lot of good, valuable content – cultural content, educational content, historical content, artistic content, scholarly content. I might work with a publisher, a museum, or an artist and help them share their content and expertise on Wikipedia.

For the museum, I might say, "You know what? You have 30,000 items in your collection. You really need to hire an experienced Wikipedia

editor to make sure that the most important items are represented on Wikipedia and the most important artists are represented on Wikipedia." Then I teach them how to do that as an organization. I teach them how to build their own capacity for editing Wikipedia, not in the interests of just the museum, but in an *alignment* of interests, because museums have the same kind of mission as Wikipedia.

I'm not working for Exxon or a Big Pharma company trying to get Wikipedia to say what they want it to say. I'm working with people that I can help and still sleep at night. With a nonprofit, they may be really interested in some issue that's just not covered well on Wikipedia, but it's covered well in the scholarly literature. They might really want an article about this topic that's important to their cause. And I can help them figure out a way to ethically, collaboratively draft that article and then submit it to the community for review.

As my wife says, the Internet is not open heart surgery. But it does take specialized knowledge to understand how Wikipedia's rules and community work. I help people navigate the territory. It's filled with virtual, community landmines. You can screw up badly if you don't know what you're doing. You can have your account banned, you can get bad press and waste time and money trying to influence the site, which is quite resilient to people trying to influence it.

I am a *Wikipedian* by any measure. I've made about 40,000 edits to Wikipedia. I'm in one of the top 3,000 editors ever. I'm also an administrator, which is a very rare role in the community. It's not to be the judge or ruler. I just have certain powers to help clean up the community. You have to be appointed to that position through a voting-like process. There's a trust that comes with that from the community. I don't want to lose the trust that I've built up.

When I was reforming my identity, it was my success in the Wikipedia community, which couldn't see me, which only knew my words but

valued my contributions – that's what really gave me a huge confidence boost to go out into the world and say, "I'm not just me who was lost. I'm me, who's a part of this movement." That was powerful to say: "I'm Jake, I'm a Wikipedia editor."

I call up all kinds of organizations and say, I'm from the Wikipedia community. Can we do this? Can we have this? Can I come and talk to you? It gave boldness. And the motto of Wikipedia--mostly for better, sometimes for worse--is *be bold*. If you see something in the world you can fix, just go do it. That is an ethic that I take very seriously. If you don't like something, change it.

I have also realized, if you can do that for *yourself*, then you can do it for the *world*.

Now, a decade after hospitalization, I live in a bizarro paradise where everything is right, but not the way I planned it. Another way to say that is I got to where I wanted to go, but I had to go through hell to get there.

I live in Bonny Doon, which is in the Santa Cruz Mountains. We share four acres. We have a pool, and palm trees. There are redwoods all around us. There are deer who run through the backyard. There are gorgeous trees, quail and Steller's jays and gophers. In many ways it's quite idyllic.

It's also quite rough living. We lost power 20 times last winter. We were evacuated from the 2020 fires. My neighbor's house burned down across the street.

We're in a very rustic corner of Santa Cruz; frankly, it was the only place we could afford to live when we had to move last. We are Santa Cruz middle class. We rent a three-bedroom home. We have neighbor tenants, we have eight other people living on the property, one the four

acres, and there's different buildings and different units and everyone has privacy, but there's also a sense of community.

We get together on July 4th. We have cookouts. If someone leaves, we have a going-away party. We have a WhatsApp group. We chit-chat and gossip and wish each other well and talk about what to do when the power goes out. We invite people over to "Hey, come get warm. We have a wood stove," or "We have a battery backup. Come use my Wi-Fi." We're helping each other out.

The landlords have done a really neat job picking interesting people who are almost all in the helping professions. Writers, counselors, therapists and people with backgrounds in education and psychology, nonprofits and counseling. It's a very special spot.

At the same time, it literally could go up in smoke any year, and we could get priced out of it at any moment. If we had to leave that property, I don't know that we could afford to live in Santa Cruz any more. But somehow I make the Wikipedia consulting work.

One thing I learned is that the low-income level for Santa Cruz for a family of four is \$132,000. Which explains why even though I'm doing pretty well as a consultant, it's barely enough, because everyone in this town who's renting is struggling to figure out how to make it work and have a certain quality of life.

I think many of us choose the Santa Cruz Mountains because we want to enjoy the time we have. I want to spend as much time as I can with my kids. We also have made some pretty, as my friend calls them, *untraditional* choices. We unschooled our daughter because she wasn't happy in public school. She's brilliant, incredible, an advanced reader, and she's stunningly articulate and active and well-socialized. But we said to her, if you don't like school, don't go to school. And in California, you can do that.

We spend a lot of time together, a lot of really quality family time, a lot of time in nature, time at the beach, time in the forest, time on the road, on road trips and all different kinds of learning. That happens in unexpected places and ways.

My friend said to me, "You really have to make different choices in order to live your life." And I was like, *Well, yeah, if you want to have a life that's different from ordinary, if you want to have your life suck less, you have to make different choices.* And sure, it comes with some sacrifices. But I think that was a theme for me: *I do have to make choices, but I can make different choices.*

I'm a father now; I have a 13-year-old daughter--my stepdaughter--and a three-year-old. And one of the things that we do in a different area of education is, they get the body books, they get the sex books, from age 3 to 13. We are comfortable with talking about bodies and relationships.

My three-year-old has a book about consent. He's been reading it since he was two. It's going to take a while to sink in, but I think he's going to know about boundaries. The other day, I asked him, "Can I give you a kiss goodnight"? And he goes, "No, dad, no kisses at nighttime". And I said, *Okay.* Then he goes, "Kisses in the morning are fine." That's an incredibly sophisticated way to draw a boundary.

One of the best pages of this book that we have about consent, it says consent can change over time. And it's really important, if you think about it in a relationship context or a sexual context, that consent can be *withdrawn*. But I think it's equally interesting for my kid that consent can be *regranted*. Like, no, not now, I'm not in the mood to be touched. Then in the morning he can run to me and go, *Kiss me, kiss me.*

But there are not enough books that tell 3- to 13-year-olds about the vocabulary of mental illnesses. It's a real lack. We need to educate youth about what mental illness looks like and the different flavors of it, and give a basic vocabulary... not just talking about emotions, but these emotions together might be depression, or these emotions together might be anxiety, and these symptoms look like a disorder, and this is when you should talk to someone about it.

I feel like there's this book to be written about when you should ask for help with your thoughts and behavior and emotions, because it often isn't really talked about until it's a problem.

There's an epidemic of denial about mental health in the world, especially in the US, and especially in youth who are just presumed to be happy or happy enough, and just going along or just going through kid stuff.

I think the more we learn as a culture about what kids are actually going through, the more we understand that it's a very hard time. It's not easy growing up in America. It's not easy growing up in an era of climate change. It's not easy growing up with social media. And we're not even giving kids the tools to articulate what they're experiencing.

Everyone is experiencing something, or has, or will at some point.

I'm just going to say this: *go find help, whatever that means for you, wherever it is.*

I had to go home. I had to be in a hospital to do it. But go find help. Fred Rogers from *Mister Rogers* said, "Go find the helpers". There are people who want to help you, who will help you, who will help you for no reason but to help you get better. Who will help you for free. Who will help you and never expect a thing from you. Who will help you and not judge you.

The other quote that always comes to mind: "When you're going through hell, keep going." Just don't stop. You need to move through certain phases, and life can get dramatically--not just better--but different. Because not everyone wants better if it's the better that they feared, or the better that they didn't want.

Get help. Get help even if you're doing well. Because therapy is like a superpower. And not everyone who's in therapy takes medications. And not everyone in therapy talks about all their problems. Maybe you want to change careers or do something new with your hair and you're afraid. Or you can do anything you want to, you know, be a superhero. Like you want to make a bigger impact on the world. A therapist is like a coach for being a human in a world of uncertainty.

So, go get help, and keep going.

For Those Seeking Support

The bravest thing to do is ask for help

This book may have brought up a lot of feelings for you. It may have helped you confront old wounds, or grapple with present crises. You may be thinking of a loved one in despair or danger. I encourage you to reach out and use as many tools as possible to seek safety and to make recovery possible. No one grows alone. Find your helpers.

The following resources are based in the U.S. There are similar organizations in many parts of the world.

- In emergencies, dial 9-1-1. Tell them it's a mental health situation.
- Anytime you need, call the Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255
- There's a new always-on mental health hotline: 9-8-8
- Find local treatment with the SAMHSA Referral Helpline: 1-877-726-4727
- Get support as a friend or family member through the National Alliance on Mental Illness: 1-800-950-6264

Stories and reading are powerful tools. I especially like graphic novels for reducing the fear of confronting and understanding illness. Here are some favorites:

- *Lighter Than My Shadow*, by Katie Green

- *It's All Absolutely Fine: Life Is Complicated So I've Drawn It Instead*, by Ruby Elliot
- *The Worrier's Guide to Life*, by Gemma Correll
- *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, by Alison Bechdel
- *Bitter Medicine: A Graphic Memoir of Mental Illness*, by Olivier Martini and Clem Martini
- *Hyperbole and a Half*, by Allie Brosh
- *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me*, by Ellen Forney
- *Just Peachy: Comics About Depression, Anxiety, Love, and Finding the Humor in Being Sad*, by Holly Chisholm

If you're interested in treatment but not quite ready to do it with another person, try out some of the many credible self-help workbooks. Those that employ cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) or dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT) are especially well-supported by psychologists and scientific studies.

Lastly, talk to someone. It can be anyone you trust enough to say, "I'm having some trouble," or, "It's been hard for me lately." You can get a great deal of relief just from sharing what's on your mind. This is a simple way to unburden yourself and find tools and next steps.

It's brave to seek help. It makes your life better. It helps you grow and deal with life's challenges. Try it. You'll be glad you did.

Parting Thoughts

My mission with this book is to impact each person who has personally experienced or witnessed the struggle of mental illness. To end the stigma and shame that prevents people from getting the help they need. To show that recovery is possible, that mental illness can be survived, and that harrowing experiences can be transformed into a dynamic and thriving new chapter of life.

My goal is to make a positive change in people's journeys, to shift society towards compassion and acceptance, and to move each of us towards a fuller realization of our precious and vibrant potential.

You can help share this message with the world, so that you can grow, and so that you can better understand and help others along your path.

I leave with a favor to ask. If you think someone could use help, offer to read a piece with them, or print a copy of an article and ask them if it's okay to share it with them. Sit down with someone you love and just ask them how they are doing. Then, with openness and sincerity, just listen. In your own moments, when it feels safe, reflect on where you have suffered, struggled or felt pain. Show yourself kindness and gratitude for where you have been and what you have become. Know that you're not alone, and that you will always be learning and evolving.

This journey doesn't have an endpoint. It's a conversation that spans a lifetime, and even generations. To heal, and to grow, we need to pull up our chairs, sit down, speak our own stories, and listen to those around us. In other words, now that you're part of the circle, invite others to join you.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank the people in my life who have had the courage to change and grow with me.

I want to thank my new kid, Coyote, for being an endless fountain of laughter, cuteness, and mayhem.

I want to thank Siko, for always being there.

I want to thank my family members who have worked on themselves beyond expectation or measure.

I want to thank my friends who have shown up, day in and day out, to share in life's ups and downs.

I want to thank my cat for not getting eaten by a coyote – a real coyote.

I want to thank Sue, for being truly wise.

-Jake Orlowitz

About the Author



Jake Orlowitz is a seeker of well people and sane societies, an internet citizen, a digital project manager, and an ally and activist for radical culture change. For the last decade he has written about mental health and recovery.

Jake runs WikiBlueprint, a Wikipedia and Open Knowledge consulting company. He founded and ran The Wikipedia Library program, and built The Wikipedia Adventure learning game. He is a native of Main Line Philadelphia and a graduate of Wesleyan University's College of Social Studies.

Jake lives in Santa Cruz, California with his intrepid wife, stepdaughter, and son. They like to hike among the redwoods of Bonny Doon, spying deer, bobcats, and quail. Recovered from a decade of illness that sent him into a mental hospital, Jake is very lucky and very grateful to be able to help others on their journey.

Reach out any time: jorlowitz@gmail.com. He'd love to hear from you.