So a friend of mine was riding in a taxi to the airport the other day, and on the way, she was chatting with the taxi driver, and he said to her, with total sincerity, "I can tell you are a really good person." And when she told me this story later, she said she couldn't believe how good it made her feel, that it meant a lot to her. Now that may seem like a strong reaction from my friend to the words of a total stranger, but she's not alone.

I'm a social scientist. I study the psychology of good people, and research in my field says many of us care deeply about feeling like a good person and being seen as a good person. Now, your definition of "good person" and your definition of "good person" and maybe the taxi driver's definition of "good person" -- we may not all have the same definition, but within whatever our definition is, that moral identity is important to many of us.

Now, if somebody challenges it, like they question us for a joke we tell, or maybe we say our workforce is homogenous, or a slippery business expense, we go into red-zone defensiveness a lot of the time. I mean, sometimes we call out all the ways in which we help people from marginalized groups, or we donate to charity, or the hours we volunteer to nonprofits. We work to protect that good person identity. It's important to many of us.

But what if I told you this? What if I told you that our attachment to being good people is getting in the way of us being better people? What if I told you that our definition of "good person" is so narrow, it's scientifically impossible to meet? And what if I told you the path to being better people just begins with letting go of being a good person?

Now, let me tell you a little bit about the research about how the human mind works to explain. The brain relies on shortcuts to do a lot of its work. That means a lot of the time, your mental processes are taking place outside of your awareness, like in low-battery, low-power mode in the back of your mind. That's, in fact, the premise of bounded rationality. Bounded rationality is the Nobel Prize-winning idea that the human mind has limited storage resources, limited processing power, and as a result, it relies on shortcuts to do a lot of its work. So for example, some scientists estimate that in any given moment ... Better, better click, right? There we go.

(Laughter)

At any given moment, 11 million pieces of information are coming into your mind. Eleven million. And only 40 of them are being processed consciously. So 11 million, 40.

I mean, has this ever happened to you? Have you ever had a really busy day at work, and you drive home, and when you get in the door, you realize you don't even remember the drive home, like whether you had green lights or red lights. You don't even remember. You were on autopilot. Or have you ever opened the fridge, looked for the butter, swore there is no butter, and then realized the butter was right in front of you the whole time? These are the kinds of "whoops" moments that make us giggle, and this is what happens in a brain that can handle 11 million pieces of information coming in with only 40 being processed consciously. That's the bounded part of bounded rationality.

This work on bounded rationality is what's inspired work I've done

with my collaborators Max Bazerman and Mahzarin Banaji, on what we call bounded ethicality. So it's the same premise as bounded rationality, that we have a human mind that is bounded in some sort of way and relying on shortcuts, and that those shortcuts can sometimes lead us astray. With bounded rationality, perhaps it affects the cereal we buy in the grocery store, or the product we launch in the boardroom. With bounded ethicality, the human mind, the same human mind, is making decisions, and here, it's about who to hire next, or what joke to tell or that slippery business decision.

So let me give you an example of bounded ethicality at work. Unconscious bias is one place where we see the effects of bounded ethicality. So unconscious bias refers to associations we have in our mind, the shortcuts your brain is using to organize information, very likely outside of your awareness, not necessarily lining up with your conscious beliefs. Researchers Nosek, Banaji and Greenwald have looked at data from millions of people, and what they've found is, for example, most white Americans can more quickly and easily associate white people and good things than black people and good things, and most men and women can more quickly and easily associate men and science than women and science. And these associations don't necessarily line up with what people consciously think. They may have very egalitarian views, in fact. So sometimes, that 11 million and that 40 just don't line up.

And here's another example: conflicts of interest. So we tend to underestimate how much a small gift -- imagine a ballpoint pen or dinner -- how much that small gift can affect our decision making. We don't realize that our mind is unconsciously lining up evidence to support the point of view of the gift-giver, no matter how hard we're consciously trying to be objective and professional. We also see bounded ethicality -- despite our attachment to being good people, we still make mistakes, and we make mistakes that sometimes hurt other people, that sometimes promote injustice, despite our best attempts, and we explain away our mistakes rather than learning from them. Like, for example, when I got an email from a female student in my class saying that a reading I had assigned, a reading I had been assigning for years, was sexist. Or when I confused two students in my class of the same race -- look nothing alike -- when I confused them for each other more than once, in front of everybody.

These kinds of mistakes send us, send me, into red-zone defensiveness. They leave us fighting for that good person identity. But the latest work that I've been doing on bounded ethicality with Mary Kern says that we're not only prone to mistakes -- that tendency towards mistakes depends on how close we are to that red zone. So most of the time, nobody's challenging our good person identity, and so we're not thinking too much about the ethical implications of our decisions, and our model shows that we're then spiraling towards less and less ethical behavior most of the time. On the other hand, somebody might challenge our identity, or, upon reflection, we may be challenging it ourselves. So the ethical implications of our decisions become really salient, and in those cases, we spiral towards more and more good person behavior, or, to be more precise, towards more and more behavior that makes us feel

like a good person, which isn't always the same, of course. The idea with bounded ethicality is that we are perhaps overestimating the importance our inner compass is playing in our ethical decisions. We perhaps are overestimating how much our self-interest is driving our decisions, and perhaps we don't realize how much our self-view as a good person is affecting our behavior, that in fact, we're working so hard to protect that good person identity, to keep out of that red zone, that we're not actually giving ourselves space to learn from our mistakes and actually be better people.

It's perhaps because we expect it to be easy. We have this definition of good person that's either-or. Either you are a good person or you're not. Either you have integrity or you don't. Either you are a racist or a sexist or a homophobe or you're not. And in this either-or definition, there's no room to grow. And by the way, this is not what we do in most parts of our lives. Life, if you needed to learn accounting, you would take an accounting class, or if you become a parent, we pick up a book and we read about it. We talk to experts, we learn from our mistakes, we update our knowledge, we just keep getting better. But when it comes to being a good person, we think it's something we're just supposed to know, we're just supposed to do, without the benefit of effort or growth.

So what I've been thinking about is what if we were to just forget about being good people, just let it go, and instead, set a higher standard, a higher standard of being a good-ish person? A good-ish person absolutely still makes mistakes. As a good-ish person, I'm making them all the time. But as a good-ish person, I'm trying to learn from them, own them. I expect them and I go after them. I understand there are costs to these mistakes. When it comes to issues like ethics and bias and diversity and inclusion, there are real costs to real people, and I accept that. As a good-ish person, in fact, I become better at noticing my own mistakes. I don't wait for people to point them out. I practice finding them, and as a result ... Sure, sometimes it can be embarrassing, it can be uncomfortable. We put ourselves in a vulnerable place, sometimes. But through all that vulnerability, just like in everything else we've tried to ever get better at, we see progress. We see growth. We allow ourselves to get better.

Why wouldn't we give ourselves that? In every other part of our lives, we give ourselves room to grow -- except in this one, where it matters most.

Thank you.

(Applause)