

<ct>Stuck </ct> <cst>An Introduction</cst>

<EPI>I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse,
perhaps to be locked in.
—Virginia Woolf</EPI>

It was 10:10 a.m. and I was in full sprint mode, running down Boylston Street, the historic site of the Boston Marathon finish.

Not that it was official race day—just my own variation: à la pencil skirt, sneakers, beat-up tote bag brimming with long to-do lists, a now-too-heavy laptop I’d wished I’d left back at the office, and remnants of half-eaten Scooby snacks for those *just-in-case* but *all-the-time* moments when there wasn’t time to stop for a proper meal.

I managed to blend in with my fellow harried travelers even as I broke into a massive sweat, while internally defaulting to a slew of self-criticisms for finding myself in yet another time pickle. My plan had been to arrive a little early. Today was important.

Between my poor sense of direction and chronic propensity to pack too much in, here I was on the verge of missing my first appointment and sending my system into complete anxiety overdrive once again. Plus, I had a meeting back at work at the top of the hour and hadn’t told anyone I had left or where I was going.

Heart pounding, I finally made it to the office of Lyla, my new therapist.

“So, you’re here because you want to manage the pressures of your new job, right?”

Right on cue, I was totally out of breath.

Even with all the efficiency and productivity strategies I’d cobbled together, the

eighty-hour workweek was putting me on the brink of adrenal overload.

I presented the sanitized story, for starters: the polished, carefully edited version to give her context so that she wouldn't think I was a total mess. The bullet points spilled out: *Age thirty-eight. Fast growth trajectory. Seasoned human behavior expert. New faculty position. Two teenagers. Book about to be released. Chronically sick mom. Crazy travel schedule. My family, students, colleagues, and patients show lots of affinity. I love them, too. I handle it all pretty well . . . most days.*

I wanted her to see my best side: that I was relatively smart and capable, that I had it together. Not that I was a lot like Dory from *Finding Nemo*—forgetting everything else I'd previously learned about not overloading my plate.

I downplayed my Dory moments and true anxiety levels. I was simply a seasoned behavioral health clinician practicing what I preach. My harried arrival into her therapy office signaled a proactive approach. Everyone should take advantage of the free EAP sessions, after all. I left out the footnotes about the constant knots in my stomach, middle-of-the-night panic jolts, endless time spent ruminating over everything, and the alienation and loneliness I often felt, even within my closest relationships.

Lyla didn't appear convinced that my workaholic ways were just for the love of the sport, or just because I'm from Boston.

"You seem to take a lot of pride in your work and family. But it seems you're stuck in constant overdrive. . . ."

It was only eleven minutes into the session.

"It sounds to me like you're a bit of a perfectionist."

I instinctively nodded and smiled politely, as only a true seasoned perfectionist can.

Inside, I fumed. *Did she miss how conscientious I am? How challenging working in a university was? How much my family and patients needed me? Isn't my session time up? Maybe this therapy thing was a huge mistake. I need some peanut butter cheesecake and wine, now!* My impulse was to run, so I scrambled for clever rationalizations.

Luckily, she didn't budge. She masterfully connected the dots between my gluttony for work and the extreme performance obsession embedded in my fabric. She saw I was working myself to the bone. My perpetual yes was costing me a lot. My definitions of working hard and worthiness had collided.

The anxiety I was marinating in, she felt, was evidence of me living in extreme overcompensation mode to please everyone. She saw how much I relished my identity as someone who does it all, in true heroic fashion. *Great, I'm a superhero wannabe.* Lyla knew that the ridiculous messages lambasting us at every turn were dumping gasoline on my fire.

You've got to have the Kardashian ass. Be a goal-setting machine. Start your own nonprofit by the time you're twelve. Answer every ding within milliseconds. Parent like Jolie, joke like Schumer, shake like Shakira. Don't let anyone see you sweat—unless it's to show off the insanely hard hot yoga class you managed to sneak in between all the deadlines, meetings, and time spent triaging the latest disaster.

There's even pressure to be Zen. Mindfulness has become the new kale. We're supposed to be fully present every minute of our day—from the boardroom to the bedroom, even when our brains have been violently sucked into the vortex of

perpetual chaos. *We're expected to meditate like the Buddha, eat our five almonds a day, swoop down, save the day, land on our feet like ninjas, have a good hair day, and pretend it's all easy and normal, as if there are such things.*

Clearly, this wasn't working for me. My pursuit of the good life wasn't turning out so well. Like a doctor who smokes, my hypocrisy was incredibly difficult for me to admit. Here I was, the go-to person at work and home—twenty-two years under my belt in behavioral sciences, hooked into being puppeteered to act perfect, while behind the curtain I was crumbling. The words to one of my favorite Alanis Morissette songs flooded my mind:

<VE>Isn't it ironic?
Don't you think?
A little too ironic.
Yeah, I really do think. . . . </VE>

I don't blame Lyla for thinking I was a bit of a mess. My attempts to disguise my disarray were no match for her clinical eye. My *frenetic, always-in-my-head* life was not without cost. She was right. I had some changing to do. And she reminded me this didn't mean peanut butter cheesecake and wine interventions, slugging down more power smoothies, or finding ways to barrel through my list more efficiently. I swore at myself on the way out of her office. She must have heard me; she smiled and gave me the proverbial therapist head nod. We exchanged knowing looks. This was going to be a lot of work.

I would need to start thinking and behaving differently. I had fallen for the delusions of our culture, telling me to be pretty, bootstrap, suck it up, and calmly carry on so that I could achieve "success" in this world. If I kept on making the textbook mistake of confusing *doing* with *being*, I was destined for even more trouble.

This wasn't new behavior for me. And it was more than the stereotypical plight of being an overworked high achiever that was pinning me down. My strict religious-brownie-points upbringing had trained me to hustle for acceptance.

For a while, I stewed in resentment at the church, bitterly shutting down my spiritual side. In many ways science rescued me, but my new obsession with measurability wasn't bringing relief. I was living entirely in my head, disassociating from my whole self. I didn't know who I was, what I believed, or how to make the million-mile march from my brain to my heart. I craved certainty, not the messy and uncomfortable state in which I found myself. Something was missing.

The same mind that had gotten me stuck was (hopefully) the same one that could set me free. I started to realize that indoctrination wasn't limited to religion. It was everywhere: work, school, and society. It was time to rip up the script, breathe deep, and reclaim a healthy definition of success that wasn't compartmentalizing my mind, body, and soul. I needed a new organizing framework that allowed more flexibility and moral grounding—one that lets *science + emotion + spiritual* to fuse—not to bicker with each other on who's superior or, worse, dismiss the other's credibility and value.

<PQ>Rethinking what you've been taught is the greatest gift you can give to yourself. </PQ>

When I arrived back at my desk, a mound of data greeted me from questions I'd asked my high-performing graduate students, gathered over years of teaching. Here in front of me were the stories of hundreds of incredible pupils, with their own ups and downs. As graduate students of all ages, they were the classic heady, overachieving,

cape-always-on people who wanted to bring impact, and sometimes got a little stuck hustling for brownie points. They were weary, too.

I wanted to know what was happening behind the scenes for them. Were they reeling from the forms of indoctrination they underwent? What types of strategies were they drawing upon to avoid compartmentalizing? What helped them find their way, without losing their way?

The analysis seemed daunting, but just a few minutes in, I couldn't put it down. I could see they also were struggling with disintegration. They had their own wounds from being prescribed a formula for life that just didn't serve them well. But they'd also found ways to wriggle their way out of it. Soon, the discoveries would help me unlock important truths. I'd been given a major gift, as I began to realize my students were just as much my teachers as I was theirs.

A few months later, I had broken new ground and developed a framework that allows us to build mental agility, so that we can work to not only accelerate progress for ourselves, but for all—the real good life that we all want.

The mentalligence (mental intelligence) model—born out of my grounded theory research, the latest behavioral science, and all my years as a clinician, educator, and parent—isn't a magic wand or linear process. It has limits, too. We should be skeptical of any advice that makes big promises or overgeneralizes life's complexity to a simple 1-2-3 solution. There's no quick-fix, one-size-fits-all formula to crack life's code. But Mentalligence is an inclusive framework, grounded in new neuroscience, that consciously integrates the many sides of human essence while embodying our global context. Mentalligence guides us to become agile thinkers who

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- Rethink and unlearn behaviors that leave us stuck.
 - Refuse to be held hostage by prescriptive, socially indoctrinated norms and rules.
 - Prioritize human progress and collective success.
 - Open the mind, integrate, and spiral upward toward social impact. </bl>

Or, put Twitter style: Rethink. Unlearn. Sleepwalking through life is dangerous.

#SpiralUP #Agility #MI #Learn4eva #Consciousness #Onlywe #GoodLife.

After months of immersion in the data, and all the moments of painstaking learning, unlearning, and relearning, I couldn't wait to share my new mentalligence model with Lyla, my students across the world, and especially now with you.

Dr. Kris (signature?)

Boston, Massachusetts

February 6, 2018 [QY: 2017?]